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RUTH'S VINEYARD.

RUTH'S VINEYARD.

A Tale of Christian Character.

EDITED BY

HAROLD KING.

SECOND EDITION.



LONDON:
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P R E F A C E .



THE story of "Ruth's Vineyard" is intended to describe, in simple but forcible language, the character of a true Christian, and to show how one, in even a lowly position, constrained by the love of Christ, and endued with a spirit of genuine piety, can so let her light shine before men, that her Father which is in Heaven is glorified thereby.

It is a tale essentially addressed to the young ; but it contains lessons applicable to every age and every condition. It is a practical illustration of religion in common life.





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RUTH'S VINEYARD.

CHAPTER I.

ATTRACTION.

"They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength."

ISAIAH xl. 31.



ONE fine evening in July, at that hour when an exquisite freshness succeeds to the heat of the day, when the rays of the setting sun play across the rich foliage more pleasantly than perhaps at any other time, a young girl followed, "weary, solitary, slow," the road which led to the village of Minster-on-Lea. She appeared about eighteen years of age. Her figure, a little over the average height, was well proportioned. Hair black as ebony, shaded a forehead already browned by exposure to the air; and eyes of the same colour,

animated by their calm and touching expression features otherwise little remarkable, owing to their extreme regularity. Her dress, though clean, betokened poverty.

She was proceeding, as we have said, towards the village of Minster, which could be seen a little distance further on, when suddenly she quitted the high road and took a path leading across a field to a clump of trees, in the midst of which stood the ruins of an ancient chapel. She hastened thither as a weary pilgrim quickens his pace on approaching an asylum where he hopes to enjoy repose and recruit his strength.

Arrived at the ruins, she placed the light parcel she held in her hand by her side, and, kneeling down on the consecrated spot, prayed fervently. She then sat upon the grass, threw around her sad and painful glances, and seemed absorbed by distressing thoughts. Her features, which still exhibited the traces of tender youth, wore nevertheless, the impress of grief and suffering ; she was excessively pale, and her eyes, swollen and heavy, betrayed tears recently shed.

After a short interval she rose, as though the necessity of continuing her journey had suddenly occurred to her, but, before leaving, she again knelt down and uttered these words : " O, Heavenly

Father, have pity upon them, and comfort them with thy divine grace. Have, too, pity on me, and guide my steps in my friendless and forlorn position. Thou hast protected and nourished me from my birth, continue to watch over thy humble servant, for into thy hands I commit my body and my soul."

Her heart filled with renewed trust, she was about to descend the hill, when, on turning round, she perceived she was not alone, and that a young girl was closely watching her. This new comer appeared rather younger than our lonely traveller ; her hair was of a light brown colour, her eyes blue, and her countenance, usually bright and animated, at this moment wore an expression of the deepest pity. She carried on her arm a basket of freshly gathered cherries, and stood in the middle of the path eyeing the stranger with curious interest.

When their eyes met, their first feeling was that of embarrassment ; the one seemed taken aback at having unconsciously had another the witness of her grief and tears, the other confused at having been surprised in a survey which might be deemed offensive by her who was the object of it. They each blushed, and at first only thought of going their separate ways, but, after a few seconds, the younger of the two, she who had played the part of an observer, came back a few steps, then

appeared doubtful, and looked frequently at the stranger, who, on her side, began to descend the hill slowly, as if to leave the other time to move away.

What was it that attracted this young girl towards the weary traveller, and what was there singular in the dress or manner of the latter to excite so eager a curiosity? These were the questions which the sore-footed traveller put to herself. She knew not who it was that was following her—that curiosity was far from being the cause of the interest of which she was the object—that Rachel Meredith possessed a soft and compassionate heart, and that, after seeing the secret tears of the other, she could not make up her mind to go away without offering some consolation.

Overcoming at length her timidity, Rachel spoke to the stranger just as she was about to quit the path to the chapel. "You seem very tired," she said, accosting her in a sweet voice; "if you will accept some of these cherries, they will refresh you a little."

One must have been alone and forsaken on the earth to appreciate all the charm of a kind word—of a sign of sympathy. Rachel, encouraged by the expression of gratitude which beamed in the eyes of her unknown companion, hastened to prevent a refusal by repeating her offer in the most pressing manner.

"If you are going to Minster," she said, "this is the road to it; it is also mine, at least up to within a short distance of the village. If you like we can walk together, and rest in the little wood below, where you can eat the cherries. Shall it be so?" she added, with a simple and interrogative smile.

The young traveller thanked Rachel warmly, and, raising her eyes moist with tears to Heaven, exclaimed, "I thank Thee, O God, for the consolation which Thou hast sent me." Then, turning to her companion, she said, "You are the first person that for the three days I have been thrown on the world, has spoken a word of kindness to me. Everywhere I have met with contempt, indifference, and often refusal, accompanied with cruel and insulting language. Doubtless you have a good mother, who has taught you to love God, for He alone can make you the good and charitable girl you seem to be."

"I have no mother," replied Rachel, sadly, dropping her eyes to the ground; "she died two years ago. She was, however, just as you have described her. But I have kind relations who strive to make me like her."

The conversation continued in this manner, until arriving at the wood, the two young girls sat

down at the foot of a broad leafy oak, which sheltered them from the last rays of the setting sun. The fresh air, the sweet perfume of the evening, the song of the birds, produced a calming influence upon the lone stranger; her melancholy became less oppressive, her countenance assumed greater serenity, and her heart seemed to expand with hope and confidence. She could not explain to herself whence proceeded this difference in her feelings, just now so painful, but the secret and indefinable charm which the Creator has spread, in his infinite goodness, over all his marvellous works, affected her spirits, and revived her with hope.

Into these deep sentiments Rachel, who was sitting by her side, could not enter. She chose, however, carefully, the finest cherries, and offered them to the stranger with a friendly *empressment*; whilst, at the same time, she appeared to have something on her mind to which she was afraid to give utterance. However, seeing her companion preparing to go, Rachel felt that she could no longer delay unbosoming herself, and said—

“I do not know you, but I have a strong desire to serve you, if I can. You have some sorrow, I am sure of it; don't say no. Did I not see you weep and pray in the ruins of yonder chapel? I shall never forget that moment, or the pain I felt

on seeing you. Now, it is impossible for me to leave you alone and deserted, as you appear to be."

The only reply which the stranger gave was a deep sigh, followed by a few moments of silence. At length she said—

"I cannot doubt that it is God who has sent you to me; Heaven bless you for your past kindness, and for that which you would still show me, and believe I shall never forget you."

"Must you absolutely go?" asked Rachel. "Where do you propose to sleep? Have you neither parents nor protectors? Excuse these questions, but—they are not inspired by curiosity," she added, with a blush.

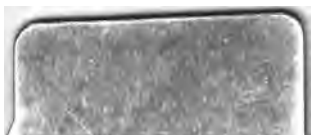
"Oh, I do not doubt it," replied the other, quickly, "I am only too grateful to you; but my history is too long to narrate now, the night has come on, and I have no home to go to."

"Don't be uneasy on that score," exclaimed Rachel; "you shall have one, I promise you; our farmstead is at a little distance from here, and my father will give you shelter to-night, I have no doubt. But are you really without assistance, without relations?"

"No," replied the unknown, "my misfortune is not so great as that; God has favoured me more than a thousand others. I have excellent parents,



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and it is for their support that I am obliged to leave them. But——excuse me——it is getting dark ; I must——”

“Listen,” replied Rachel, with great earnestness. “I understand all ; we have no time to lose. Come with me, I will answer for the reception you will meet with.”

The unknown hesitated, for she had received cruel and insulting replies at the houses where, the preceding nights, she had asked shelter. The family of Rachel might not resemble the kind-hearted girl ; besides, her position, she felt, excited suspicion, and justified distrust. Rachel, seeing her hesitation, said to her—

“Promise me one thing, that you will not leave this place before my return. I will not be more than a quarter of an hour at the outside, wait for me till then.”

Saying this, she darted off and disappeared amidst the foliage of the trees.

What were then the thoughts of the stranger ? They crowded on her brain, whilst her heart was full of the goodness of God and the touching behaviour of Rachel towards her. Bursting with gratitude, she could not refrain from expressing what she felt. “My God,” she cried, “how great is thy goodness. It is when I thought myself most

abandoned that Thou sendest me consolation and support. Praised be thy holy name, be my support always, and may I never forget thy mercies."

After a few moments, Rachel returned to her *protégée*, and both soon disappeared by a little path which wound through the middle of the wood.





CHAPTER II.

THE SCRUTINY.

"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers; for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."—HEB. xiii. 2.

THE farmhouse to which the two girls directed their steps was situated on the opposite side of the wood from that by which they had entered. Everything there betokened order, comfort, and a certain amount of elegance, which is not always to be found amongst farmers of the class to which David Meredith belonged. The stables, the outsheds, the dairy, the dovecots, even the yard itself—too often no ornament to this description of dwelling-house—were neat and tidy, and all that could shock propriety and offend the eye removed from view. Nature seemed to have favoured the inhabitants of this place, and to have gathered round their modest residence a multitude of beauties which she ordinarily distributes over various localities. Nothing could be more fresh and smiling than the valley at the

head of which the house was situated—nothing more clear and limpid than the stream which traversed it, and which, winding rapidly, formed a thousand bends, appeared, disappeared, and then reappeared again constantly between the poplars, the willows, and the birches which shaded its banks.

It was on this delightful spot that the farm of Springfield stood, hedged in on one side by a wood of hazel and young oaks, and commanding on the other side a view of the meadows watered by the Brawl, the stream of which we have just spoken. A little orchard, filled with apple, pear, and cherry-trees immediately surrounded the house, which was itself covered with jessamine and clematis, whilst two majestic beeches offered a shady shelter to a rustic seat erected near the doorway.

It was towards this pretty dwelling that our unknown traveller advanced, conducted by Rachel. On approaching the house, all her natural timidity returned. Little accustomed to appear a suppliant before strangers, the idea made her heart beat violently. The night, which had already closed in, would not have permitted her to distinguish anything within, had not a brilliant flame which rose in the fire-place spread a cheerful light through the spacious day-room of the farm. At this sight, the recollection of her father's hearth, where but lately

she had always been so impatiently received and so tenderly welcomed, crossed for a moment the heart of the poor girl ; but she made a powerful effort to suppress the thought, which was overwhelming her.

“Come in, young woman,” cried out, in a stern voice, an elderly woman, who was sitting in a corner of the chimney. “Never has hospitality been refused at Springfield, and we shall not begin with you.”

These words, uttered with more frankness than tenderness, reassured somewhat the unknown. She approached the uncourteous speaker, and was about to express her thanks, but was interrupted at the first word. “Enough, enough ; if you are the honest person I take you for, we are sufficiently repaid by giving you shelter.” Then, perceiving a blush which this simple doubt had called up on the face of the pale and downcast features of the stranger, and, fearing to have wounded her feelings, she said, kindly, “Sit down ; and whilst waiting for supper, which won’t be long, tell me your name, and by what misfortune it is that you are wandering about thus unprotectedly ? Perhaps I can be of some service to you.”

“My name is Ruth Owen,” timidly replied the young girl, adding an account of her parents, the place of their residence, and the object of her journey.

Margery—for so the old woman was named—was puzzled to understand how any father and mother could resolve to part with their only daughter, and suffer her to be exposed to the thousand dangers of the world, alone and defenceless. She knew, indeed, that there unfortunately exist only too many parents, who, neglecting the duties which religion and nature impose upon them, draw down upon their children, by their unworthy conduct, public indignation and the chastisement of Heaven. But if this had been the case with Ruth, her voice would hardly have trembled with emotion when speaking of her separation from her family. Besides, had she been brought up in such a school, her behaviour and whole person would not have borne the impress of virtue, and the amiable qualities which one was struck with in her.

These reflections filled the mind of Margery, when the step of a man, who was whistling a merry tune, was heard approaching outside. Notwithstanding her advanced age, Margery rose immediately, and went to meet him. She joined him just as he was about to enter the house, and, whispering a word in his ear, led him into the garden.

Ruth thought that this new personage must be a member of the family, and that they wished pro-

bably to acquaint him with the arrival of a stranger, perhaps to communicate to him the conjectures they had formed concerning herself. The fear that these conjectures might not be to her advantage, no less than the dread of submitting to another survey, made her tremble. Her spirit, naturally sensitive, suffered intensely from the uncertainty of her position. In the midst of her agitation, she had recourse to her never-failing source of strength, and breathed a short, silent prayer for aid to enable her to pass through this fresh ordeal.

This prayer having restored tranquillity to her mind, she glanced around her and examined the room in which she found herself. Everything indicated order and cleanliness; a dresser well stocked with plates and dishes neatly arranged, occupied the lower end; curtains of red serge hung around the windows; a high-backed arm-chair covered with the same stuff was placed near the hearth; while the chimney, built as in olden times, was capacious enough to contain several persons in the cold winter evenings. The moonlight, which penetrated just then into the chamber, enabled her to perceive outside the clematis and jessamine which interlaced each other around the casement. How happy should I be, thought Ruth, if my parents had such a home! Let the will of God,

however, be done ; let Him grant me the means to relieve them, and my most ardent wishes will be satisfied.

At this moment a child some twelve or thirteen years of age entered, and going to the hearth lit a candle ; she then gave the finishing touch to the preparations for supper. She put on a clean dish, placed the chairs round the table and uncovered a large pipkin, which was simmering over the fire. She took out a succulent piece of bacon, which she laid upon a dish and garnished it with savoury cabbage ; she then poured the liquor into a tureen filled with slices of bread, and afterwards dressed a salad of lettuce, which with the cheese and butter appeared to complete the evening meal.

All these preparations completed, the little girl ran into the garden to tell those who were walking in it that supper was ready.

Ruth now felt all her apprehensions revive ; she regretted that Rachel was not near her, and thought that she could have found some encouragement in the compassionate looks of that young girl. But since her arrival at the farm Rachel had disappeared, and was probably engaged on some urgent work.

At length Margery came in, followed by a

strong athletic, active-looking man, who appeared to be about forty years of age. His features were regular, his eyes bright and piercing, whilst his black and bushy eyebrows, and his hair, which was of the same colour, gave to his countenance a somewhat hard and stern expression. However, never was one more deceived by external appearances ; for his face, although perhaps severe, concealed a generous and kind heart.

This man was the son of Margery, and proprietor of the farm—in a word, David Meredith. His reputation as a first-rate farmer was spread far and wide, and he was considered the honestest and the most active man of his class in the county. To these qualities, which were universally recognized, he believed he could add another, which was not so generally accorded ; he fancied himself endowed with an extraordinary penetration which, according to his own statement, had never been at fault. He had always had an unshaken confidence in the superiority of his own judgment, and this feeling became strengthened by the deference which his neighbours paid him. Two or three wild fellows having gone to the bad, as he prophesied they would, David thought himself infallible, and even persuaded those around him into the belief, so that in more than one of the houses of the

neighbourhood his opinions were considered incontrovertible.

However, this little weakness apart, no man was more frank, more disinterested, more jovial amongst his friends, more eager to defend them, more terrible to scamps, or more generally beloved than David Meredith.

The words which he uttered in a low voice on following his mother into the house, were such as to justify the conjectures of Ruth as to the subject of their conversation. Fortunately she did not hear them, so great was her embarrassment. "Trust to me," he whispered to Margery, "I will soon tell you what she is; one glance of my eye is worth a hundred others."

He saluted Ruth and wished her good evening in a tone which indicated a mixture of kindness and distrust. This suspicion did not escape the poor girl who, confused and uneasy, placed herself, on the invitation of Margery, at the lower end of the table. The supper was at first somewhat silent, and each time that Ruth raised her eyes she met the scrutinizing look of David fixed upon her. The meal was nearly finished, yet Rachel did not appear. Margery looked frequently towards the door at the bottom of the room, and seemed vexed at her non-appearance; her countenance like that

of her son, though somewhat hard at first, after a little examination, revealed a no small fund of kindness and even sensibility.

Margery's arm-chair was placed at the head of the table, and she seemed accustomed to the respect and deference of all who came near her. From underneath the simple frilling of her cap one could perceive hair white as snow, and which was rolled up over the neck into a thick twist, according to the fashion of her youth.

"Dolly," she said, at length breaking silence, "go and see what has become of Rachel; her supper will be cold, and we have nearly finished."

She addressed these words to the same girl who had prepared the supper. Ruth had been struck with the likeness of the young child to Rachel, and could scarcely doubt that they were sisters; but her position rendered her so timid, that she had not ventured to ask her. However, the name of Rachel roused her from the reserve which she had hitherto maintained, and she could not help expressing some of the sentiments which she felt for her amiable protector. She spoke with all the warmth which gratitude lends to an elevated mind, whose virtuous impressions, still in their pristine vigour, have never been impaired by passion or the poisonous breath of the world. Her dark eyes, until now sad and

dejected, brightened as she spoke, and completely painted the soul within her. Gratitude, and many other virtues, could be alternately read in them, which were heightened by an expression of candour that left no doubt as to her sincerity.

Thus was it under the double influence of these irresistible impressions, and the pleasure which his paternal heart received on hearing the praise of his favourite daughter, that David, thrusting his large hand across the table, offered it to Ruth, saying, "You are indeed an excellent lass, and I am now as sure of it as if I had known you ever since you were born. Yes, mother," he continued, turning to Margery, who smiled at this abrupt declaration, "when I first perceived her, my mind was made up; but, upon my word, the examination has only confirmed it. And now, young girl, excuse me if my first reception was a little cold; the most solid friendships, you know, are not those which are formed in a moment. Every one knows that David Meredith is at first somewhat reserved and blunt; however, he is honest at heart, and devoted to those who gain his esteem. We are henceforth friends. You deserve it, I'll answer for it; and, thank Heaven, the guarantee of David Meredith is worth something."

Ruth was at first taken aback at this singular

apostrophe ; but immediately detecting, in the midst of this blunt frankness, the excellent qualities and kind intentions of the farmer, she acknowledged also the goodness of God, who, when appearances were most against her, had prepossessed these people in her favour ; and she secretly blessed Him for this new mercy.

At this moment Dolly and Rachel appeared. The latter was red and out of breath. "I thought that Tommy would never be quieted," she said on entering ; "he has been crying a whole hour, without once leaving off. I have sung to him, and rocked him, to no purpose ; but, fortunately, he has at last fallen asleep."

"Is he unwell ?" exclaimed the father and grandmother both at once ; for it is needless to add that Tommy was the brother of the two young girls.

"Oh, he is well enough," replied Rachel, laughing ; "it is only naughtiness which has kept him awake."

"And whose fault is it," replied David, good-humouredly, "if not hers who spoils him all the day long ? The little rascal knows how to get the best of it, and to cry when he wants a song or a sugar-plum."

It was to Ruth that Farmer Meredith addressed

these last words, and the tone in which he spoke them showed that, far from really blaming the sisterly indulgence, he was pleased at it, and believed he saw in it a new proof of her goodness of heart.

As to Margery, when she learnt that the child was not ill, she turned to Ruth, and asked her, in a tone full of interest, how long it was since she had left her parents, and in what part of the country they lived.

Ruth replied that it was three days since she had seen her father, mother, and her two little brothers. On uttering these words, her eyes filled with tears, and it was with difficulty she could command herself sufficiently to answer the questions put to her.

"She had," she continued, "already walked forty miles since she left Blackhill, the village where her parents lived; and as she was going to Coventry, she had fifty miles still to travel. At each place where she had stopped for the night, she had knocked at the doors of several poor cottages before she had found one which would open to receive her. She had besides to endure much ill language; and at one place a corner in an outhouse was all the favour she obtained. She had also suffered severely from the heat during the long sultry days. That evening, perceiving the ruins of

a chapel behind some trees, she had retired thither to seek courage from the Almighty, to enable her to brave fresh humiliations, and to resign herself patiently to them. She afterwards sat down to rest herself a little, for her feet, much swollen, pained her considerably." Then, regarding Rachel with a sweet expression of gratitude, she added, offering her hand affectionately, "You know the rest."

Rachel, who felt herself attracted towards this sweet girl by an irresistible sympathy, took her hand and clasped it warmly.

David and old Margery contemplated this scene with secret gratification, and felt the last shadow of their suspicions vanish before the simple and candid demeanour of Ruth. Throwing all reserve aside, they lavished on her marks of interest, and would not let her retire for the night before she had promised to remain several days with them.

Ruth, touched to the heart by so much kindness and confidence, added of her own accord the promise to relate the next day the misfortunes of her family, and the motives which had determined her to leave them for awhile. Margery and David appeared pleased and satisfied with this announcement. Rachel, delighted at the favourable opinion which her parents manifested towards her *protégée*, observed that it was already late, and that Ruth

must be very fatigued. This was admitted; and after having wished the others good night, she followed Rachel, who conducted her immediately to her little chamber.

They reached it by a narrow staircase, and Ruth found herself exactly over the room in which they had supped. A door communicated with the garret occupied by Dolly, whither the cradle of the child had been carried. It was placed near the window, and the moon shining through the branches of jessamine which surrounded it, lighted up the peaceful face of the little fellow that slumbered there.

Ruth could not keep her eyes off this beautiful infant. She felt a holy reverence on thinking that this weak and graceful creature was the temple of the Holy Spirit; and she fancied she could see the tutelary angel of this child watching over its charge, and warding off all danger from this precious treasure committed to its keeping. Filled with these thoughts, "My God," she exclaimed, inwardly, "how great is thy goodness for thy poor creatures! Not content with redeeming them by thy blood, Thou hast been pleased to give them a Heavenly guide, that they may walk safely through the snares and quicksands of life. Grant that this little one may always be docile to Him under whose wing he

reposes at this moment, and that his brow, so pure, may always be, as now, the emblem of the innocence of his heart."

At this moment Rachel rejoined Ruth, and leaning over the cradle, regarded the infant with a tenderness almost maternal. Then, after a short interval of silence, she said, not without visible emotion, "You see this child, Ruth, he has cost us dear; it is to me that my good mother has entrusted him, and so long as she lives, her daughter will justify that confidence. Poor little fellow, he little knows the bitter tears which were shed on his entrance into the world."

On concluding these words, she kissed his rosy cheek lightly, and upon it there fell a tear. Ruth did the same, and they then went back to Rachel's room. Everything indicated the same order and the same cleanliness which were to be seen downstairs, and the furniture, though somewhat rough and old, evidently belonged to persons in easy circumstances, and careful of it.

Rachel, in spite of her strong desire to enter into conversation with the weary traveller, was still reluctant to keep her from that repose which she so much needed. Before lying down Ruth knelt and prayed. She knew, however, that long prayers are not always the most acceptable to God,

and felt it impossible to prolong her wakefulness ; but if her prayer was short, how fervent was it ! how deep were her feelings of gratitude ! how touching and filial her expressions of love ! It was in this spirit that she slept for the first time under the hospitable roof of the farm at Springfield.





CHAPTER III.

AN HONEST HERITAGE.

"And the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house and in the field."—GEN. xxxix. 5.

SPRINGFIELD had not recently come into the hands of the Meredith family. For nearly two centuries it had passed from father to son, one generation succeeding another, down to David, who now rented it. This antiquity was regarded by the country folks as a kind of nobility, and gave to the family a consideration which was however still more justified by other titles. Probity and honour seemed hereditary in it, and if at long intervals a young fellow more thoughtless than wicked had roused the solicitude of his parents, and caused some uneasiness as to his future, still the Merediths had never had to deplore in any of its members a *mauvais sujet*. Consequently the more respectable inhabitants of the village of Minster-on-Lea, situated a short distance from the farm, considered it a great

privilege to be admitted there on a footing of intimacy. What had maintained during so many years the family in the path of duty and rectitude was without doubt its respect for religion, and the fidelity with which its precepts were observed ; for any virtue which has not this basis must be frail and of short duration. God alone can give to man the courage and wisdom to overcome his passions, and surmount the innumerable obstacles which the enemy of his salvation throws in his way.

True fervent faith, at the time of which we are speaking, was far from being resplendent amongst the inhabitants of the farm. Although its principles were still respected, real piety nevertheless had seen more flourishing days there, and the voluntary practices, which it inspires in those whose hearts it fills, had formerly been observed with greater strictness than at the period when our story commences.

Whence arose this difference ? Doubtless from many years of pastoral neglect. For nearly forty years the parish of Minster-on-Lea had been afflicted with a vicar whose chief delight was hunting and feasting, and who on the Sundays slurred over the beautiful service of our Church, and galloped through a cold and heartless sermon. In this state of things the spiritual wants of the

people were shamefully neglected. However, Margery, who had married an honest man, educated her children as well as she could, and taught them the religious principles she had herself elsewhere acquired. On the death of the old incumbent, a pious and zealous clergyman still in the vigour of his life was fortunately appointed to the living, and had been installed some weeks when the incidents which we have narrated occurred at the farm.

But to return to Ruth. The next morning when she opened her eyes the sun was shining into the windows ; she had slept soundly, and it was some moments before she could recall the events of the evening and the place in which she found herself. When she recovered, her heart expanded towards God with a lively sense of love and gratitude. Then looking for Rachel, she perceived to her surprise, that she had already disappeared. Fearing lest it should be late, and remembering it was Sunday, she was preparing to rise in order to be ready for church, when the door opened and Rachel entered, a smile on her lips. She had brought with her a large can of warm water.

“ Why are you so eager to get up ? ” she said cheerfully to Ruth ; “ it is only seven o’clock, and breakfast is not till eight. You see we have plenty

of time before us, and to employ it usefully you can begin to bathe your swollen feet ; such are the orders of grandmother, who has always successfully used this remedy when she has been more than ordinarily fatigued." Rachel then placed a pan by the side of the bed, and with a lithe bound on to it sat near Ruth, who again thanked her a thousand times for the attentions she had heaped upon her since their first meeting.

"Don't think me better than I am, please," replied Rachel, laughing ; "I would not do as much for any one. No, it is not because you appeared sad and weary that I endeavoured to comfort you, but because I liked you from the first moment I saw you ; and I am not the only one, for I know what grandmother said this morning," she added, in an affectionate tone, at the same time giving to what she said an air of mystery. Whilst they were talking thus, Ruth bathed her feet in the warm water, and soon felt refreshed and more at ease. Rachel, delighted with the success of her attentions, left her to get ready her father's breakfast, "who would be hungry," she observed, "as he had gone out for a walk."

In about half an hour Ruth descended to the room where she had supped the previous evening.

Margery, fatigued by a long night of pain and sleeplessness, had been eager to leave the bed where she had suffered so much, and already risen and dressed, occupied her high-backed arm-chair near the chimney. In spite of the beauty of the weather, her limbs, stiffened with age, enjoyed the warmth of the fire. The room was dusted, the table laid, and a large saucepan full of milk simmered on the hearth. A window slightly open admitted the perfume of the flowers, still fresh with the dew of the morning, whilst the sun shone brilliantly upon the foliage of the garden, and vivified all nature with his presence.

Rachel, active and happy, busied herself with one thing after another, and seemed to place her whole happiness in contributing to the comfort of others. All the good order which reigned in the house was the fruits of her diligence, from the table, so well polished, to the cap, goffered with such perfection, which adorned the venerable head of her grandmother.

"I thought," said Ruth, on entering, "I heard the little one awake; but I did not like to go to him, lest the sight of a stranger might frighten him, and make him cry."

"If it should be so," replied Margery, pleasantly, "the little fellow is the only one here who

would not delight to see you. It is I who say this, young woman ; and when Mother Margery says a thing, every one knows that they must believe it. And the poor feet, how are they ? I do not ask about the night, for I know you have slept well."

Rachel had disappeared during this conversation, and Ruth, sitting near Margery, thanked her for her interest and attention. They then referred to Rachel, and Margery spoke of her granddaughter in a manner that confirmed fully the good opinion which Ruth had at first conceived of her. They were interrupted by the return of David and little Dolly, who had accompanied him. He accosted Ruth with the same cordiality he had evinced on the previous evening. By degrees Dolly, overcoming her timidity, approached the stranger (it was thus she was called), and tried to prove to her, by her friendly caresses, that she also was glad to see her in the house. Then, becoming, like most children, rapidly familiar, "How pretty you look to-day !" she said, surveying Ruth, with great simplicity, from head to foot ; "I should hardly have known you again."

Ruth smiled, and, to put an end to an examination which seemed about to include every article of her dress, she begged Dolly to go and tell her sister that her father had come home.

The child ran off, and Ruth, wishing to leave her hosts at liberty, went into the garden to breathe the pure air of the morning.

"We shall soon know her history," observed David, looking after her as she went down the path. "That child," he added, with a profound air, "has something in her manner which I cannot explain, and which resembles nothing that I have hitherto seen."

"What is singular, David," replied Margery, "is, that though I have lived longer than you, my son, I can say as much respecting that young girl. I have seen others, though only a few in number, equally gentle and modest, but her saint-like look I have never met with before."

"Besides," observed David, "with all her sweetness the little personage has an imposing air, and I would not counsel our young dandies to say anything rude within her hearing. I calculate they would not be well received."

This reflection recalled to Margery the singular circumstances in which Ruth was placed. "All this," she said, "makes the destitute condition in which we see her all the more inexplicable. She does not appear poverty-stricken; nothing about her person indicates indigence. See how clean and neat she is in her Sunday's dress."

At this moment Ruth crossed one of the small paths of the garden, and her apron, white as snow, her spotless cap, and dress of olive colour, still new-looking—all this exterior was far from giving the idea of poverty. She wore, suspended from her neck, a gold cross, which, however, did not appear every day: it was the gift of her mother, who had worn it during her childhood. We may easily imagine how dear it was to Ruth.

The breakfast ended, the family went to church. The thought of the solemn service in which she was about to assist at first absorbed Ruth's whole attention, and plunged her into profound meditation; but carrying her thoughts to that family which she had left so miserable and broken, she poured out her heart before the Lord with the touching simplicity of a child who recounts his griefs to a kind father. She laid before Him her sorrows, her cares, her fears, and added an earnest supplication that she might never forget, in whatsoever circumstance placed, either His manifold mercies or the duties He imposed upon her. Oh, how sweet were her tears as she prayed thus! How they comforted her oppressed heart! It is in proportion as his humble supplications rise to Heaven, that the soul of the pious child is filled with an ineffable sense of peace and hope.

On returning to the farm, however, a painful reflection mingled itself with the inward satisfaction which she felt. Rachel, so good, so sympathizing—Rachel, whom she had endowed in her heart with all the virtues of her age—Rachel, she had just discovered to her grief, was not pious. Many times during the divine service her wandering and distracted glances had astonished her companion; then, all the way home, her numerous remarks on the people who were at church proved to Ruth that the attention of her new friend had been directed to everything except the one object which ought to have fixed it. This discovery distressed Ruth. She could no longer feel the same confidence in the amiable qualities of Rachel, and feared lest, deprived of the only foundation which could render them solid, she should not resist, by and by, the dangerous influence of bad examples. But quickly seizing upon an idea which seemed to excuse her young protector, she said to herself, “Oh, if like me she had had a pious friend to instruct and guide her, her heart so good, so compassionate, would not rest indifferent to God. His divine Word would have produced abundant fruits in her soul, whilst mine has only been too often an ungrateful and sterile soil in which it has been buried. If Rachel cannot yet be reckoned

amongst the number of the faithful servants of our Lord, at least she has, I am sure, not abused his grace. How happy I should be if I could teach that heart so worthy of the truth a knowledge of God, and thus repay to Him a hundredth part of the goodness which He has manifested towards me."

Far from feeling a coldness for this excellent girl, towards whom gratitude attracted her, the most tender charity was joined to all the sentiments which had already inspired Ruth, and she felt distressed when she thought that her sojourn near Rachel would not be continued long enough for her to be useful to her as she so much wished.

Let us pass rapidly over the events of this day, and arrive at the hour which preceded supper, when the family reassembled reminded Ruth of the promise she had made the previous evening. The artless girl began without further delay the recital of the various circumstances which had brought about the ruin of her family, and the misfortunes which still weighed upon it. Not being able to give effectively the *naïve* and touching language in which her whole heart spoke out, we shall content ourselves by giving, in the following chapter, a short *résumé* of what she told her new friends that July evening.



CHAPTER IV.

RUTH'S STORY.

"Hold thee still in the Lord, and abide patiently upon Him : but grieve not thyself at him whose way doth prosper."—PSALM XXXVII. 7.

THE mother of our heroine, Elizabeth Owen, was the seventh child of Hannah Woods, the widow of a small farmer who had brought up a numerous family in the fear of God and the love of virtue. Elizabeth had never, properly speaking, known her father : he had died when she was only two years old. Of her five brothers two had been killed fighting in India, one was shipwrecked, and the other died of yellow fever in the West Indies ; the youngest, reluctant to leave home, had remained with his mother, and formed, with his two sisters, her sole consolation.

At a short distance from Blackhill, the residence of the Woods, was a school conducted by two maiden sisters. The elder, indeed, took no very active share in the management of the establish-

ment, which, owing to several recent reverses, was not in a very flourishing condition. One stormy night in November, whilst all were buried in profound sleep, the house was discovered to be on fire. A speedy alarm was raised, and every effort made to awaken and rescue the unfortunate inmates ; but, notwithstanding the utmost exertions of the neighbours, the whole building was burnt to the ground, and all the furniture it contained consumed. When, too, the first confusion and excitement were over, it was found that the elder of the two sisters had perished in the flames. The grief and despair of the survivor were extreme. All that she had in the world was lost, and from a state of comparative ease she was reduced to absolute penury. The shock brought on a violent illness, which resulted in a state of weakness, for which no remedy could be found, and at length the doctors gave up a cure which appeared to them beyond all human skill.

Jane Richmond—for this was the name of the surviving sister—blended with the gentlest virtues a piety at once deep and enlightened ; therefore, though she found herself after this calamity overwhelmed by misfortune, and without resources, she nevertheless placed all her trust in God, believing that He would raise up a support and consolation for her

from among his humble servants ; and this He did. The widow Hannah Woods, hearing apparently by chance of her distress, went to her, and, witnessing the extreme misery of her condition, offered her an asylum in her house. Jane, touched to the heart by this generous and charitable proposal, accepted it with the deepest gratitude. To say with what respect, with what care she was surrounded, would be too long a task. She soon became one of the family, was revered and looked up to in all cases of emergency, and acquired, from the love and devotion of those who tended her, the endearing soubriquet of "Aunt."

Let us pass over the six or seven years which followed. Elizabeth, the youngest girl had now married a furniture broker by the name of Owen, who had not, indeed, been very prosperous in business, but whose religious principles, character, and conduct seemed to assure her real happiness. She obtained from Aunt Jane, too, the promise to live with them when her poor mother, who was rapidly failing in health and strength, should quit this valley of sorrow and tears, and believed that she had thus obtained a precious boon ; it was, in fact, a great favour which she had asked, and it was one sought by her brother and sister as well

as by herself. Thus we may see the value these children set upon Aunt Jane's love.

As for Jane herself, she was often sorely pained at being a burden to a family not over well to do, and whose fortune consisted in their individual labour. She laid, however, her affliction, and the humiliation which mingled with it, before God, and consoled herself by distributing around her treasures of a different nature it is true, but still very precious : for it was eternal life which she assisted her friends in winning, not less by her excellent precepts than by her pious example.

Elizabeth Owen, to her great regret, was separated from her mother immediately on her marriage, and went to reside with her husband, Joseph Owen, in a little cottage which he rented on the further outskirts of the town of Blackhill. It was there, however, that living in the fear of God, and striving to do their duty, they passed several happy years, united by the ties of a tender affection, which the birth of several children served to strengthen, Ruth, our heroine, was the eldest.

Her father, assiduous at his business, toiled on from morning till night, whilst her mother attended to the young children as well as to household affairs. Thus their life passed away peaceably enough in the quiet enjoyment of frugal ease. But constant

happiness is not the lot of this world. The first affliction in store for Elizabeth and her husband was the death of Hannah, who was deeply beloved as well as respected by her children ; and though the arrival of Aunt Jane under their roof brought them some consolation, it could not prevent their feeling bitterly so grievous a separation. Shortly after, too, they lost their eldest boy, six years of age, who was very dear to them. However, to abridge this narrative, which is becoming too minute in detail, we will only say that, educated under the eyes of Aunt Jane, instructed and moulded by her, the constant object of her care and zeal, Ruth acquired an intelligence and piety which were above her age and the humble station in which she was born. Not only did her pure and innocent young heart, like a tree carefully cultivated, bear the most precious fruits, but her mind also acquired in the constant society of a truly superior woman, a breadth and justness of ideas exceedingly rare at any age, and in such a position.

Ruth had attained her seventeenth year when new misfortunes visited her family. Her father, whose health had hitherto been robust, was attacked by an illness, the violence of which excited the liveliest alarm for his life, notwithstanding he

received the most assiduous and tender nursing. However, the prayers of his wife and children were heard, and answered ; he was restored to them, but his convalescence was delayed from month to month. In the meantime, the neglect of his business, and the necessary expenses attendant upon his illness, brought grievous trouble into the household. They were forced to sell a portion of the stock to pay the debts which had accumulated, and to meet the daily expenses. Unfortunately, too, Joseph returned too soon to the workshop, and over-exertion stretched him again upon a bed of sickness, and this time for an indefinite period. Rheumatic fever was added to his other ills, and deprived him of the use of his limbs. He grieved less for what he himself suffered than for the anguish his illness brought upon the family. They sold successively all they possessed, and the shop had to be disposed of. George, the eldest son, though only fourteen, worked with a steadiness and courage above his age, in a situation which he had obtained, and brought in a few shillings weekly ; but this small sum ill sufficed for all their needs. Poor Elizabeth devoted her time to the care which her invalid husband and an infant only fifteen months old required.

In the midst of these disasters Jane, who suffered

bitterly to think that she added by her presence to the heavy burthens of this family, made several vain efforts to obtain their permission to depart ; nothing, however, could induce her friends to consent to the separation.

One morning Ruth, returning from church, where she had prayed earnestly that God would show her what she ought to do in this painful extremity, revolved in her mind an idea which she regarded as a kind of inspiration. When the family was assembled to eat their frugal dinner, she announced that she had a proposition to make, and entreated her parents not to reject it before she had explained to them her motives and expectations. After having shown the exigency of their present position, she reminded her father that he had a sister at Coventry, of whom he had often spoken ; perhaps she could be of service now, and procure for her in that town the means of being useful to the family by her labour. The moment had come, she said, to show them her gratitude for the care and tenderness which they had lavished upon her, and she would die of vexation should she remain a helpless witness of their distress and sufferings. Then, anticipating the objections so natural to their solicitude as to the dangers which she would have to encounter under this novel arrangement, and

pointing to Aunt Jane, who regarded her tenderly, "Be not uneasy," she said to them, "it will not be in vain that she has taught me to know God, and the sweetness of his yoke. Perhaps He has allowed me to be so well instructed in his holy law to reserve me for particular trials."

We will pass over in silence the fears of Ruth's mother, and the objections which she raised against her design, the grief of the poor father, whose state necessitated this terrible sacrifice, and that of the venerable Aunt Jane, who loved her as a daughter.

Her filial courage and tenderness surmounted all difficulties. Her father's sister was written to, and fifteen days after the morning we have just mentioned, Ruth, provided with a light bundle, in which her mother had put some of her own best things, and a little sum of money, which they had borrowed to supply her wants on the road, entered the chamber of the invalid to take her leave. On her knees, by the side of this bed of suffering, she felt the burning and emaciated hand of her father press her forehead as he invoked the blessings of Heaven upon her. In the midst of her own sobs, and those of her dear parents, she received with their last counsels those of Aunt Jane, who was to her a second mother ; and at length, tearing herself

away from the arms which so tenderly detained her, she hurried out of the door. As she closed it, she heard her darling mother exclaim, "O God of mercy, to you I commit her; all my trust is in thy Almighty protection."





CHAPTER V.

A JOURNEY ENDED.

"Then she said, let me find favour in thy sight, my lord ; for that thou hast comforted me, and for that thou hast spoken friendly unto thine handmaid, though I be not like unto one of thine handmaidens."
—RUTH ii. 13.



AS Ruth uttered the last words of her narrative, she felt herself drawn into the arms of Margery, and perceived that tears filled the eyes of that good-hearted woman.

"My dear child," said the latter, pressing her to her heart, "and I hesitated an instant to receive you under our roof ! Oh that we could read the hearts of others, and thus avoid afflicting those who deserve it so little ! Never fear, my child, the blessing of a father always brings good ; and that which you received from yours at the moment of sacrificing all for him, has already been confirmed in Heaven."

Whilst Margery was thus speaking, Rachel silently embraced her *protégée*, for she saw that Ruth was striving to repress the lively sensations

awakened in her heart by the recital which she had just finished. In spite of her efforts, tears flowed plentifully down her cheeks whilst she affectionately grasped the hand of Rachel, to make her understand that in the midst of her affliction she was not inaccessible to the kind sympathy which the latter exhibited towards her.

At this moment, David, who more than once during the course of the story had appeared moved, and since its termination had seemed to reflect deeply, suddenly rose, and going up to Ruth, expressed to her, with the blunt frankness which characterized his nature, the interest she had excited in him. "A thought had just struck him," he added, "and if it could be carried into effect, it would, he hoped, be for the happiness and advantage of all. Why should Ruth go further? She only wished to employ her time so as to succour her parents. Well, for some time he had desired to find a fit person to assist Rachel in the management of the house and the dairy; if she liked to remain with them he could offer her not high wages, it is true, but at Coventry she would not find higher, being still young, and never having been out to service. Besides, the infirmities of Margery increased every day, and she would be glad to have Ruth near at hand whilst Rachel was obliged to leave her to per-

form her necessary duties." David expatiated long upon the advantages of this arrangement to every one, wishing to dispel from the mind of Ruth the fear that she might be retained out of compassion and charity rather than any real need of her services.

"Now, then, young lass," he added, finishing his speech, "you appear to me ready to accept my offer; if it does not please you, think nothing more about what I have said; Heaven knows that I shall regret it. But that is not the question; it must be agreeable to you. However, you are too fatigued at present to reflect upon it; to-morrow you can give me your answer. Come, now, take a little walk in the garden whilst waiting supper; it will clear up your ideas."

Ruth rose to follow the advice, the propriety of which she strongly felt. Rachel would have accompanied her, but her father and Margery stopped her. "Leave her alone, my child," said the grandmother; "you would, I see, make her feel how much you wish her to remain with us, but that must not be; she must be left to her own judgment."

On entering the garden Ruth followed a little path which led to the side of the brook, and sat down on a seat placed at the end of the enclosure. There her deliberation was not long. She saw

at a glance in the proposition of David all that she could have dared to hope in her wildest dreams. In fact, this journey so long and fatiguing, which remained for her to make, was now terminated ; those embarrassments, those dangers which threatened her on the road she had no longer to dread ; that unknown aunt, unable perhaps to assist her, perhaps indifferent to her trouble, to her she would not have to relate her misery, or importune her to excite her pity. All these trials had been spared her, and it was perhaps the submission with which she had accepted them beforehand that had secured her this new proof of the goodness of God : for his mercy is so great that He accepts the voluntary sacrifice of our dislikes in spite of our powerlessness to escape from his decrees.

Here, then, is Ruth admitted into the bosom of an honest and industrious family, where, beyond the most ardent expectations of her afflicted parents, she will be sheltered from danger, and where she will earn, without having to toil beyond her strength, something with which to support a suffering father, a worn-out mother—all those, in fact, whom she had with so much grief just left. Nor was this all. A gentle and affectionate companion will be near her to assuage her troubles by

her sympathy, and thus complete, as it were, the advantages which the new situation presented to her.

I will not attempt to paint the manner in which the consent of Ruth to the proposition of David was received at the farm. The reader now knows sufficiently the personages of our story to supply what we could say on the subject. I will only add, that the supper that evening was a very pleasant one, and that before rising from the table, David, drawing a jug of his choicest cider, drank, and made each of the others drink, a welcome to Ruth, to the re-establishment of her father's health, and to the recovery of the venerable Aunt Jane.

"Oh!" exclaimed Ruth, on hearing the last toast proposed, "if you think me worthy of any interest, it is to her indeed that I am wholly indebted for it; and since I owe to her such friends as you, should I be ashamed to express my gratitude?"

Every one was touched with this little speech, and the spirit in which it was spoken. It was in the utterance of such mutual sentiments that the evening passed, until it was time to seek rest for the night.

Old Margery had not been the least satisfied with the arrangement concluded between David

and Ruth, for she had quickly discerned the merit and quality of the young girl. Margery joined to a great deal of intelligence a depth of penetration and originality, which would have made her a very remarkable woman had education developed and expanded her natural abilities ; but deprived of all culture, as often happens amongst her class, she was imbued with a thousand false ideas, a thousand prejudices, the absurdities of which she could not perceive. For example, instructed solely in the general precepts of religion, she only knew piety as a name, or from ignorant persons who seemed sometimes to endeavour to disfigure it by the ridiculous manner in which they practised it. Margery imagined that it only suited persons who had nothing else to do than to run from church to church, or to pass in praying and reading solemn books the hours which they did not know how to employ otherwise ; and, besides, of what use was it ? was such and such a person who never failed to perform punctually their religious duties more charitable, more gentle amongst her family, more industrious, less vain ? Not at all ; often on their return from church or chapel, where they have passed hours which the duties of a mother or wife claimed, they have brought home trouble and vexation by the bitterness of their words. From

such examples—whether true or false, Margery had not stopped to inquire—she concluded that religion ought to be respected by every one, but that we should be careful not to let it turn the heads of young people. The poor woman, whose ignorance was her best excuse, repeated in perfect good faith against piety the reproaches which the enemies of all religion with perfidious intention utter against it. If she had used her own judgment she would have easily understood that a thing so excellent in itself may be disfigured in certain cases, but that at bottom it always remains what it is in reality, beautiful, admirable—in a word, always itself. The picture of a great master covered by a light veil, or placed in an unfavourable light, is it not always a *chef-d'œuvre*, although we cannot for the moment appreciate the work? So is it with true piety, source of so much happiness, the impregnable barrier against evil, the strength, light, consolation, life of the faithful soul, it is not less an invaluable treasure, because vulgar minds and worldly spirits ill understand its divine inspirations.

As we have just seen, Margery never having, from the circumstances we have already mentioned, had the happiness of knowing true piety, entertained towards the phantom, to which she had given the name, the most absurd prejudices. Still,

her honest intentions, and a heart inclining to good, rendered her, more than many another, capable of appreciating its sweetness and its charm. Ruth's narrative, in which the pious sentiments that animated her were more than once manifest, had at first a little alarmed Margery, who feared to find her more disposed to go to church than to occupy herself with her new duties. What, then, was her astonishment, during the first days which followed her admission into the farm, to see the indefatigable ardour of this young girl for work, her activity in discharging her different duties, her constant endeavour to oblige every one, to make good what had been neglected, to supply what had been forgotten ! She asked herself sometimes what it was that gave Ruth that serenity, that equanimity of character, which nothing could disturb. She knew well that the most happy dispositions are not free from some varieties of temper : for Rachel herself, although generally good and gentle, was sometimes put out. Margery, convinced hitherto that nothing could be compared to her granddaughter, perceived each day that the comparison between Ruth and Rachel was always to the advantage of the former. This enigma she could not divine, for she knew not that the dissemblance which existed between them on this one point explained, naturally enough, what

seemed to her inexplicable. Rachel had been as happily endowed by nature as her *pious* companion ; but this epithet, which the latter deserved so well, contained the secret charm, the marvellous influence of which perfumed, as it were, all her actions, whilst the natural virtues of Rachel resembled the wild flowers, whose colours are vivid and form graceful, but which exhale no sweet odour, and whose fragile stem, deprived of its nourishing sap, may be beaten down by the least wind.

The affection which had been formed between the two girls steadily increased ; and although Ruth, feeling well that she would not be understood, did not venture to lay bare her whole heart to Rachel ; nevertheless, she found in her intimacy great comfort. She incessantly received marks of true friendship and the utmost confidence : for, without imitating her companion, Rachel could not but admire her simple virtues, mingled as they were with so much candour and gaiety of spirit. Ruth had not that sombre and austere piety so calculated to inspire disgust. Accessible to all the innocent enjoyments of her age, no one entered into them with more zest, or derived from them greater pleasure. A quiet walk, a story in the evening, a surprise for Margery on her birthday—all this delighted her ; and the peace of a pure conscience,

added to her natural vivacity, made this virtuous girl a veritable picture of happiness.

Aunt Jane had taught her to lay before the Lord, not only her troubles and trials, but also her pleasures. She had often told her that God deigned to receive such homage, and that she should be, every moment of her life, under his eyes, as under those of a tender father who looks with a benevolent eye upon the innocent amusements of his children. It was also Aunt Jane who had taught her that the most sure way to honour God and to please Him is to perform faithfully the duties of our station, and that the practice of piety would have no value in his eyes if we omitted the obligations which He had Himself imposed, by placing us in such and such a position. She had also warned her against the danger of ostentation, in times of exaggerated fervour, by too great a multitude of pious customs, which sometimes fatigue, and are then abandoned with a sort of remorse, which it is always difficult to overcome. Wishing, however, to guard her against another snare not less dangerous, the neglect of her religious exercises, she had traced for her a rule of life so simple and easy, that it could not become onerous to follow in any situation. But she also required the greatest strictness and fidelity on this point, for

she knew that if we allow ourselves to forego, by a sort of spiritual idleness, which is a very perilous temptation, now one habit, now another, indifference insensibly springs up in the heart. Prayer is neglected, and this rampart, behind which a pious soul finds itself protected against the darts of the enemy, crumbles away, and leaves it defencelessly exposed to his attacks.

Ruth, fortified by her excellent instructor against these various dangers, advanced rapidly on the road of salvation; and had it not been for her separation from her beloved parents, which weighed heavily on her mind, she would have been perfectly happy in her new position.

We have omitted to say what the reader has doubtless already supposed, that immediately on her establishment at the farm, Ruth had informed her family of this new mark of protection which she had received from Heaven. A reply from Aunt Jane was filled with expressions of touching gratitude and wholesome advice. She then informed her that her father, revived by the happy result of the journey of his beloved daughter, had experienced a sensible improvement in his health, without, however, their being able to foresee when he would be able to resume work, which was the object of all his prayers.



CHAPTER VI.

A FALSE STEP.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."—

MATT. vi. 13.

THREE months had elapsed since the arrival of Ruth at the farm, and each day she became more and more appreciated. From the grandmother down to little Tommy, who appeared as happy in her arms as in those of Rachel, all loved her; and, on her side, Ruth became attached more and more to this good family, to whom she owed so sweet an existence. But unalloyed happiness cannot be the lot of a soul so privileged as hers, and her divine Master, in bringing her to his cross, tried her with new sorrows, that her reward might be greater. It was from the side that she least expected it that the blow came which wounded her so grievously. For the better instruction of the reader, however, we must go back a little, and introduce here a new personage, who for a time had a material influence on the events of our story.

About six weeks before the arrival of Ruth, the young girls of Minster-on-Lea had welcomed the return amongst them of a companion from whom they had been separated several years. This was Sophie Passmore. She was the daughter of a farmer, who, a widower since the birth of this child, was attached to her as a sole remaining link. He had educated her as well as his means would allow up to the age of twelve; but at this time, falling into a large and unexpected inheritance, his position became changed, and pride entered his heart in the wake of riches. His greatest care now was to destroy whatever could recall his former humble condition; he built at the extremity of the village a fine house, and laid out around it a beautiful garden. The tailor of the neighbouring town was also called in, and effected a remarkable transformation in his toilette. Settled in his new domicile, he condescended to see only the richest people of Minster-on-Lea and its vicinity, whilst even these he received with an air of hauteur and importance which covered him with ridicule; so true is it that pride, blind to its own interests, nearly always surrenders its bondsmen not only to the displeasure of God, but also to the contempt of men. As for Mr. Passmore—for now no one dared to forget to add the Mr.—he determined to

give his daughter what he called an education suitable to her new position, and desired that she should surpass all her former friends by her accomplishments and talents. He knew not that he was digging with his own hands an abyss which should engulf his happiness and that of his daughter.

Instead of bringing Sophie up in the simplicity of her former state, and especially inculcating in her religious principles, which alone can give steadiness and fixity to the character, he placed her in a school badly conducted, where she soon lost those few good qualities which she possessed. If she did not acquire a single branch of knowledge which could be useful to her, she learnt, on the other hand, a thousand things which it would have been better for her not to have known. The mercenary ladies to whose care she and her young companions had been committed, had undertaken the task, so noble and interesting in itself, of educating youth with a view to their own sordid interest. This end once accomplished, they noticed with complete indifference the defects of their pupils, and, too often, even did not hesitate to flatter their vanity and evil inclinations, if they could hope to reap any fruit from their base complacency. Those, for instance, whose parents were rich, and whose liberality might be useful, were certain to escape

censure, and to be constantly the objects of marked preference and attention. Sophie, thanks to the fortune of her father and the readiness with which he allowed her to draw upon his purse, soon became one of the favoured girls.

We will not enter into details—we will draw the curtain over so repulsive a picture, for, if there be one thing more odious in this world than another, it is the conduct of those who, whilst ruining themselves, drag down in their ruin the innocent souls committed to their keeping. A strict account will be demanded of them by Him who said, “Woe unto you if ye offend one of these little ones.” Not only is the crime great by its wickedness, but by its too often irreparable consequences.

When Sophie returned to her father at the age of seventeen, she presented a spectacle of all the defects which a bad disposition, joined to a still worse education, could produce. Her exterior offered nothing remarkable, except, indeed, the expression of pride and self-sufficiency which animated features otherwise common enough. As to spirit, she had only too much of it, if we are thus to designate the *finesse* which made her captivate those whose good graces she wished to win. Her imagination, nurtured by the worst and most absurd tales she could lay her hands on, suggested

ideas utterly false about a world which she only knew by such idle reading. Imbued with a thousand ridiculous notions, she believed that on entering into society she would play the part of one of those heroines who charmed her, and would thus become the object of admiration and attention to every one who came near her. Her disappointment, then, was great when she found herself alone in a quiet country village with an aged father, whose birth she at the bottom of her heart despised, and to whom, she boasted to herself, her education had made her superior. Poor father ! how severely was he punished for the pride which had induced him to raise his daughter out of the position in which she had been born. How many bitter tears was he not forced to shed by her to whom he looked for consolation in his declining years, and who repaid the cares and anxieties bestowed upon her childhood and youth with disdain and indifference ?

Hoping, at first, that the frequent visits of her fashionable schoolfellows would make the time pass lightly enough, Sophie Passmore had received with insulting hauteur her former companions of Minster-on-Lea who came to renew their acquaintance with her. What, then, were her trouble and vexation when her father informed her of his

intention not to countenance any visiting, and especially none from her schoolfellows: for his eyes were soon opened to the manner in which his confidence had been responded to. To complete her unhappiness, Sophie had no taste for any occupation, and, always idle, was absolutely dying of *ennui*.

At last, for want of being able to do better, she resolved to make friends of some of the young girls of the village, at least with those who appeared to her most worthy of being raised to such a dignity. It was unfortunately about this time that she met Rachel; the gaiety and amiable vivacity of the latter pleased her extremely, and she determined, accordingly, to make her her most intimate friend; that is to say, according to her ideas, the companion of her dangerous readings, and the confidante of the follies and waywardness of a flighty imagination. On the other hand, Rachel was flattered by the preference shown her by one who, thanks to her town education, appeared to her a very superior young person. She began by seeking pretexts for going to Minster-on-Lea, knowing well that Sophie, always idle, and generally sitting in a bower which overlooked the road, would see and call her in, which, in fact, always happened. Then Sophie took her to her room, talked to her

about the fashions and entertainments of the season, spread out before her her prettiest dresses, and lamented that she had not any opportunity to display them. All these things, new to Rachel, astonished and amused her, and gave her the idea of vain pleasures which she had hitherto never known, and consequently had never dreamed of regretting. Sophie incessantly impressed upon her how great a misfortune it was that the youth of a pretty young girl like her should be passed away in a lonely farm, whilst anywhere else she would be courted, and enjoy all the amusements of her age. These flattering pictures charmed the inexperience of Rachel, and insinuated into her heart their subtle poison. What terrible ravages they would have wrought there if God, in his infinite mercy, had not raised up an angel to hold her back on the brink of the precipice! and this angel was the humble, the gentle, the charitable Ruth.

Ruth had seen enough of Sophie to form a just idea of her principles and character, hence it was not without great pain that she remarked the intimacy which began to spring up between her and Rachel. Aunt Jane had often said to her, that a connection with a perverse soul was enough to destroy the most excellent disposition, and she remembered the proverb, "that he who loves

danger shall perish by it." This thought filled her heart with sorrow and uneasiness, as it made her understand the danger which threatened Rachel. She was so much the more afflicted at it because she believed herself upon the point of reaping the fruit of the pains she had unceasingly taken to sow the seeds of piety in that generous heart. In proportion as she made Rachel acquainted with the knowledge of Christ Jesus, and the love of God for men, gratitude sprang up in her heart, with the desire of fulfilling for the future the duties which his law imposes upon us. But would not this favourable progress be checked by the examples and the counsels which she received from Miss Passmore? Ruth had too much cause to fear this, for already Rachel, from whom she had ordinarily received so many proofs of affection, seemed no longer happy except with Sophie. For Sophie she neglected that companion, whom at first she had so warmly cherished, and for a time treated her with unmerited coldness. To what could Ruth attribute this change? It was, perhaps, to the efforts she had made to open her eyes to the dangers of this new acquaintance. But was it not enough that she should take no notice of these faithful warnings, but that she should grieve her friend by an apparent indifference? How

many tears she shed silently, in the midst of her avocations, over her whose kindness had heretofore been her greatest consolation in the grief which the separation from her family caused her, and to whom she owed the happy situation in which she then was ! But this friendship, which lately cemented them both, no longer existed except in her own heart ; she could not doubt it, and wept still more bitterly as this conviction took root in her mind.

However, Ruth deceived herself in judging so severely of Rachel, who was very far from entertaining for her that indifference which the latter supposed, and which her behaviour seemed to indicate ; but she allowed herself, for the moment, to be drawn into the nets which her inexperience had not enabled her to perceive, and without ceasing to love Ruth, she had entertained some suspicions which certain odious insinuations cast out against her pure and noble character had raised in her mind. However, the time is not yet come to reveal to the eyes of the reader the unworthy conspiracy against the innocent Ruth, which ought to excite our pity rather than our indignation against her whose imprudence all but lost her an invaluable friend.

The coldness of which we have spoken becoming every day more marked, Ruth determined

to speak frankly to Rachel, and waited impatiently for Sunday, the day on which they were accustomed to walk together after church. Both of them, up to this time, had regarded this day as the most agreeable of the week, for it procured them, in addition to the pleasure of joining in the divine service together, that of admiring in common the beauties of nature, and enjoying pleasant and innocent conversation. Although the vexatious conduct of Rachel had deprived these little walks of a great deal of their charm, she had not yet thought fit to dispense with them. But this new grief awaited Ruth at the very moment when she hoped to regain the heart of her friend by the course which she meditated. Filled by this sweet hope, and absorbed entirely with what she was going to say to her, she was waiting for Rachel after church, pacing slowly up and down the garden, when she perceived the latter going hastily out of the house, and making for the low stile of the wood towards Minster-on-Lea.

“Where are you going,” cried Ruth, in a gentle voice, not a little alarmed; “shall we not take a walk together?”

“No,” replied Rachel, sharply, “I am expected elsewhere.”

Saying these words, she went off quickly, and the voice of Sophie, which Ruth heard at some distance,

informed her at once of the reason why she had been forsaken. Her emotion was so intense, that she had not strength enough to return to the house.

She therefore crossed the small bridge of planks thrown across the Brawl, and entered the wood at the bottom of the garden.





CHAPTER VII.

ON THE BRINK.

"The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat."—GEN. iii. 13.

RUTH, plunged in the saddest thoughts, walked on and on in the wood, and followed at random the different paths which presented themselves, until she came to a rustic bower secluded amongst the trees. Here, sitting down, she poured out her fears and sorrows to Him whom she had always been accustomed to regard as her supreme Comforter. Far from feeling the anger and dissatisfaction, which so many others would have believed themselves justified in feeling at the unkind and inexplicable conduct of Rachel, she only experienced the painful sense of desertion. But no gall, no bitterness, mingled with her grief, which was so much the more keen as it was caused by one so tenderly beloved. Hitherto the objects of her affection had in some sort repaid her for her devotion by a tenderness not less ardent; but now she began to discover the inconstancy and

deception so common in a world still quite new to her. Ruth had not yet learnt, moreover, that a friendship not based on religion is fragile and transient, otherwise she would not have been surprised to find that she had to grieve for a faithless friend, who had coldly and cruelly forsaken her. She would have understood that a sweet charity, joined to the natural affection with which Rachel had inspired her, had imparted to her own feelings a force and depth unknown to those who are guided only by their sympathies. Therefore, with what ardour she desired to convert her friend to piety, to associate her in its holy practices, in its gentle communions with Heaven—in a word, to teach her that unspeakable happiness enjoyed by a young heart unreservedly consecrated to the service of its God. To attain this object, what efforts, what thoughts, what prayers, had it not cost her! and it was at the very moment, when she expected to realize her hopes, to gather the fruits of so much anxious care, that they appeared lost to her, in consequence of a connection, which the enemy of our salvation employed as a certain means of retaining his prey.

Penetrated by this sad thought, the good and generous Ruth remained a long time in the bower, praying for her friend, and striving by her fervent

supplications to draw upon her the especial protection of her Heavenly Father.

On rising to leave the place, Ruth felt a tender hope quicken her soul and mingle with the calm of an irreproachable conscience. Comforted and strengthened by prayer, she slowly regained the farm, enjoying the fragrant evening breeze which gently fanned her forehead, still burning with the excitement she had undergone.

In the meantime, what was Rachel doing? Sitting with Sophie at the bottom of Mr. Passmore's garden, listening, with a greedy ear, to one of those tales so much bepraised by her new friend. The numerous adventures which it contained, and the marvellous style in which they were told, charmed her young and lively imagination. She was shocked neither at the improbabilities which swarmed in its pages, nor at the extravagance of the characters depicted, nor at the ridiculous exaggeration of sentiment they were made to utter. The ignorance of the young girl extended to everything, and prevented her seeing what was false and absurd in the scenes which delighted her; and, she who read to her was scarcely capable, if desirous, of destroying their bad effects. Indeed, their fatal effects had already appeared: these dangerous works had begun to bear, in Rachel's heart, their usual fruits—the

disgust of solid things and useful occupations, and the love of vanity and pleasure. Hitherto, Sophie, respecting to a certain extent, and in spite of herself, the extreme simplicity and innocence of Rachel, and fearing besides to lose a conquest which she wished to secure, had taken the precaution to omit from what she read anything that might at first shock the principles of her young friend. She wished to lead her, by a path more circuitous and slow, but not less sure, towards the frightful goal which she proposed to herself. And what was this goal? To drag her from the path of piety, and plunge her into the abyss of sin.

But whence sprang this cruel desire? It proceeded from the same principle which excites against the faithful the rage of the spirits of darkness—from envy, from that odious motive which gives rise to the numberless efforts of the wicked to procure approvers and accomplices in their crimes. The aspect of virtue to them is insupportable; it is a tacit condemnation which, added to the voice of conscience, engenders an importunate remorse, which they in vain endeavour to stifle. Nor is it less true that the beautiful aspect of a soul clad in the robe of innocence, which it has received from the hands of its Creator, penetrates even into their corrupt hearts, and fills them with

bitter hatred against the possessors of a treasure which they have themselves squandered.

If such were not at first the sentiments of Sophie, at least her conduct had the same result. It tended to alienate Rachel from her duties by withdrawing her from the prudent counsels of Ruth, and especially from the obedience which she owed to her parents. This is what we shall see whilst unfolding the different plans which Miss Passmore had, one after the other, conceived and abandoned, and explaining the motives which influenced her determination. This story will not be without its use if it serves to show young people the danger of imprudent friendships, and the frightful and rapid progress which a young girl may make in evil, when once the foot is placed over the threshold of truth and righteousness.

For a long time Sophie had hoped to shake Mr. Passmore's resolution, and to obtain from him the permission to invite some of her former companions; but seeing that all her efforts were unsuccessful, she determined to obtain for herself, unknown to her father, who appeared to her a tyrant, the amusements which he refused her, and for that purpose to secretly participate in the parties and entertainments which one of her friends, lately married, and settled only a mile or so from Minster,

gave pretty frequently. To attain this object, she had to deceive her aged and unfortunate father, to defy all propriety, to plunge, alone and unprotected, into the midst of the society of young persons, at once frivolous and worldly.

After this, Sophie had only one thought, that of removing whatever could interfere with the success of her projects. Consequently, a faithful servant, devoted to her father, who had been with him for years, and who in some degree mitigated, by her care and attention, the pain which his daughter occasioned him, was the first victim of her guilty plans. Sophie perceived the necessity of having in her who waited on him, not a constant witness, and perhaps informer, of her faults, but an accomplice and an auxiliary, who might assist her in the execution of her designs. Gertrude, malignantly calumniated, was sent away by her too credulous master, and replaced by a person named Susan, worthy in all respects of her new mistress. She was fortunate in finding an asylum at Mr. Passmore's, since, turned out from several houses, she was without the hope of obtaining a respectable situation in the neighbourhood. Mr. Passmore, deceived by a false character, received her into his service, and she soon gained the good graces of her young and imprudent mistress, whose vanity and

vices she flattered on every occasion. This unprincipled and irreligious girl completely spoiled, by her pernicious advice, Sophie's heart, already so evilly disposed; so true is it that when once, through our imprudence, we reach the edge of the gulf, the lightest effort of the enemy is sufficient to precipitate us into it, and that a single step from the path of rectitude leads us into crooked ways, where we are entirely lost, wandering about without hope of return.

It was between these two persons so well formed to understand one another, that those measures were concerted, which were to deceive the watchfulness of a father and a master, and to bring about a correspondence with Rachel. Soon they found means to pass whole days with this unconscious friend, who was charmed with their dangerous companionship. All the clever manoeuvres to conceal their secret doings were due to the inventive mind of Susan, who, more clever in this respect than her mistress, knew by a thousand ingenious tales how to dupe her master and induce him, under false pretexts, sometimes to stay at home, sometimes to go out, perhaps for a whole day, according as it served their purpose for the time.

Without dwelling further on the kind of life

led by Sophie, which engages our attention solely in consequence of her connection with Rachel, we will only add, that although her time was devoted to vanity, to coquetry, and the reading of exciting novels, she felt *ennui*, and often even remorse, during the short moments of solitude which she could not always avoid. At first her sole object in making the acquaintance of Rachel was to divert herself; but soon struck by the innocence and the good qualities of this young girl, humiliated too by the contrast which her conscience incessantly set up before her eyes, she resolved upon levelling their moral position, and to drag Rachel down after her into that gulf into which she herself had fallen.

We must now speak of another sentiment which imperceptibly glided into Sophie's heart. Although it was in its origin worthy of a nobler soul, in her it soon degenerated, and became a low and burning jealousy. There are few, however depraved they may be, in whom the desire to become attached to some one whose character justifies their affection, has not existed, and who have sometimes hoped to meet with a sincere return. Weary of vain connections where they have hitherto found only envy at their success, and desertion in their misfortunes, they feel the need of

basing their new affections on solid merit, perceiving how foolish they have been in reckoning on the fidelity of those who despised the injunctions, the threats, and the consoling promises of our Lord.

All these thoughts crossed the mind of Sophie as she witnessed the tender friendship which united Ruth and Rachel. A sad feeling of isolation, in spite of the unworthy confidante whom she had chosen, embittered her soul. She did not say to herself as she ought to have done, that her conduct alone had induced the severity of her father, the consequences of which she lamented ; she did not say to herself that she ought to have found in that father, who had brought her up from childhood with so much affectionate solicitude, a worthy object of her affection and her care, and that instead of embittering his declining years she ought to strive to make him happy, and to devote herself entirely to this sacred duty. No ! she thought nothing at all of this, but continued to exhibit in her inner life the odious spectacle of an ungrateful child—in a word, she was heaping upon her head the chastisements which God justly reserves even in this world for this kind of wickedness.

Sophie was not slow, too, in detecting that Ruth had divined her character, and feared that

she would acquaint Rachel with her discovery. Hence the hatred that took root in her heart ; hence it was she resolved not only to disunite the two friends, but also to injure Ruth in the opinion of her benefactors, and, if possible, to drive her from the farm. Fearing, however, to betray her perfidious intentions, she resolved to act with cunning circumspection. Thanks to the counsels and assistance of Susan, Sophie believed herself on the point of attaining the end which she proposed to herself, and would infallibly have succeeded had not Heaven, touched by the prayers and virtues of an innocent victim, thwarted the plans directed against her.

From malignant insinuations, cleverly thrown in, and even with an appearance of candour, on the worth of Ruth and the sincerity of her virtues, Sophie and her maid gradually advanced to positive accusations, although at first trivial. They laboured to convince Rachel that Ruth, whom she had received from a sentiment of pity so honourable to herself, was employing a thousand secret means to captivate the esteem and confidence of her kind hosts ; that she would not remain there, or that she aimed at nothing less than to establish her paramount authority, which she would use to control unreservedly all the actions of

Rachel. They added later that what Ruth had told them about her family could not be anything else than pure invention, and that the day would come when Rachel would repent of the imprudent compassion which had induced her to take home a girl, a vagabond perhaps, or at least unknown.

We may feel sure it was not in a day that all these scandalous suggestions were thrown out for Rachel's ear. No, they had at first disgusted her, and she exhibited deep indignation at such wicked suppositions; but the astute Sophie, far from insisting upon them, showed perfect indifference with regard to what she had insinuated, and removed thus from the mind of her innocent dupe the alarm that might have upset all her projects. The latter simply imagined that Sophie had been led into error, and that it was friendship alone which made her so watchful over anything that might injure her. By degrees these same accusations, adroitly repeated, astonished her less, then made more impression upon her mind, till at length doubt sprang up in her heart and struck a severe blow at the confidence, hitherto boundless, which she entertained respecting the extraordinary virtues of Ruth.

However, when Rachel reviewed in her own mind all that she had witnessed of the conduct of

Ruth, her touching gratitude, her angelic sweetness, her modesty, her charity, she could not believe in the attacks directed against her friend. Nevertheless, as we have said, that confidence, which is the soul of friendship, was, though not exactly destroyed, momentarily tarnished by the poisonous breath of calumny. The libeller may be compared to the noxious reptile whose trail is dreaded by all nature. A single drop of the poison which it spits forth is sufficient to spoil the beauty of the fairest flower. An hour ago, its brilliant colours attracted admiration; now, bending on its stem, it must die, if a kindly dew does not come to refresh it and revive its drooping head. Let us hope that Rachel, having suffered by the contagious influence of calumniators, watered at length by the spiritual dew, will perceive her errors, and exert her utmost to repair them.

Let us, however, return to our narrative.

Sophie, as we have said, was absorbed secretly with Rachel in the pages of a novel which her married friend had lent her. The reading had been prolonged beyond their calculation, when Susan ran up to them out of breath.

“Good news!” she cried out, in a rhapsodical manner. “They have all come—Madeline Burrows, and Clara Graham, and Emily Thornton,

and Fanny Heslop, and Tom Graham, and a lot of young fellows, who—I really don't know who they are."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Sophie; "we are undone; my father will see or hear them."

"Oh, yes," replied Susan, bursting out into a hoarse laugh; "you think I don't know what I am about. Ah! you don't know me yet. Understand that it is always in the hour of danger that Susan Betheridge shows herself most expert. You shall see. I was taking the cake out of the oven, which you wished me to make secretly for you two, when I heard the front door bell ring. Isn't it capital to have to do with one who has brains? I ran to open the door, and perceived our friends of the other day. Without waiting a moment, I let them know their imprudence, and sent them away into the wood until I could call them. Then I ran upstairs to master, and told him so pitiful a tale, that he melted at once, and is gone off with his stick and his cloak to see Dennis O'Connor, who broke his leg last week. Dennis lives sufficiently far away to keep master out all the evening. Then I sent young Jack across to Rylands to get a jug of cream, which, with the cake and the apples which I have just taken from the store-room, will make a very agreeable repast. I will invent, by and by,

some pretty little story to account to master for the disappearance of his choice apples. Jack has gone to the wood to fetch the fugitives. Now tell me, don't I know how to manage matters? and where will you find a girl to compare with your Susan?"

Saying these words, her arms a-kimbo, and her attitude indicating the most vulgar triumph, the expression of this wicked girl's eyes was so false and bold, that Rachel, already disgusted by her speech, turned hers away in shame. Sophie, on the contrary, charmed with the cleverness of her servant, thanked her with great vivacity, and promised her that her zeal should not go unrewarded.

The clamour and laughter of the new arrivals were now heard. Sophie ran out to meet them; and Rachel, left alone, felt her natural timidity return, and regretted that she had not sooner gone back to Springfield. An instinct of honour and delicacy warned her that young girls of her age, and that of her companion, ought not to receive, alone, and without the surveillance of their natural protectors, a lot of young men as acquaintances. She resolved, therefore, to escape unperceived; and gliding along a winding path which led to a little gate at the bottom of the garden, she reached it, and closed it quickly, believing

that she had not been seen. But Miss Clara Graham, who was the last of the troop of guests, had noticed her, and cried out to Sophie—

“Who is that pretty little creature who has just gone away? What a beautiful complexion! What fine blue eyes! What a pity that she should be dressed like a dairy-maid!”

“And what a greater pity that she should *be* one,” drily replied Sophie, whose pretensions and vanity were wounded by the praises bestowed on Rachel. “If she had not been one, I would have introduced her to you,” she added, addressing the rest of the company.

“Yes, no doubt, if it had been otherwise,” said a young stripling, in a low voice, to Clara Graham. “If, for example, her pretty rosy cheeks had been less calculated to throw into relief the faded colour of Mistress Sophie’s.”

Clara Graham, as we may see, was by no means disposed to spare Sophie Passmore, whose ridiculous and glaring pretensions excited derision. Every one regretted the absence of pretty Rachel, whose gaiety and amiable spirit Sophie had herself often praised. It was resolved that there should be a pic-nic in Bircham Wood one day next week; and Sophie, devoured by jealousy, but striving to dissemble it, promised, with a faint expression of

pleasure, to bring Rachel. But she had at this moment associated her in her heart with the hate she had vowed against Ruth.

Meanwhile, Rachel slowly regained the farm, as had done some time before her pious friend. But during the solitary return, how different were her feelings and thoughts to those which had occupied Ruth. The latter had gone away sad and dejected ; she had prayed, and returned reanimated and comforted. On the contrary, the heart of Rachel, once so peaceful and smiling, had become a veritable chaos, in which dwelt only trouble and agitation. Her imagination, filled with strange and romantic scenes, pictured her position, hitherto so happy, as destitute of everything that she had heard called "the pleasures of life." Her self-love, which had been so frequently flattered, was now cruelly wounded by the exclamation of Clara Graham, which had reached her ears, as only a slight hedge separated them at the moment when she had retaken the path to the farm.

What would she have thought of her new friend, had she heard *her* reply ?

However, she was pretty sure she had heard *that* remark. She possessed, then, the physical advantages which her new readings and her conversations with Sophie had taught her to regard as so precious

a gift. How could she doubt it? The praises of a stranger had come to confirm those of her dangerous friend, whom she might think blinded by affection. But, then, they had pitied her for being dressed like a dairy-maid. This was not strictly true, for she was better dressed than a dairy-maid; but it served to reveal to her her humble position, and this was sufficiently humiliating and vexatious. She was almost tempted in her heart to curse her lowly birth. Alas! the depravity of the heart has descended to this point, but the contempt of men, joined to the chastisement of Heaven, has, sooner or later, overwhelmed the guilty. The Lord, however, had pity on Rachel, and spared her this remorse. Her heart was full, and more than once that evening she fancied she could hear the sweet voice of Ruth calling to her to take their usual walk, at the moment when she only dreamed of avoiding her, and rejoining Sophie. Then the abominable Susan came into her thoughts, and she could not help pitying the unfortunate father who was so sadly deceived.

All these reflections told against Sophie, whom Rachel had not believed capable of such conduct. Her eyes began to be opened; she was sad, agitated, restless and bitter tears flowed down her cheeks as she reached the farm. She hastened to wipe

them away, and went in to her grandmother, who asked her, in a severe tone, why she had been away so long ; she then added that, fortunately, Ruth, being more punctual, had done what it was Rachel's duty to attend to ; that she had given little Tommy his supper, and that, having put him in his crib, had herself gone to bed with a violent headache.

In fact, Margery, who at first had been rather gratified with the intimacy of her granddaughter with Sophie, began to see this intimacy in another light. She had been informed of the dismissal of the faithful Gertrude ; then reports about the behaviour of Sophie towards her father reached her ears ; and then, again, Rachel had changed considerably for some time past—less attentive to her grandmother, less industrious, less careful of her little brother, she seemed perpetually absorbed in thoughts altogether foreign to what surrounded her. Everything displayed the indifference with which she performed her duties : for one voluntary omission of this kind is only too sure to bring on another, just as a ring taken off a chain soon leads to the dispersion of all the others. Margery had also remarked the shade on Ruth's brow, and the coldness of Rachel towards her friend, and was resolved to trace out the source whence the misunderstanding

sprang. But she determined also to act cautiously, and avoid an outbreak. Accordingly, without positively forbidding her grandchild to continue to see Sophie, she told her only that her visits were becoming too frequent, and that henceforth she must not go there so often. Rachel, ordinarily so gentle, got out of temper ; the insinuations unfavourable to Ruth crossed her mind ; she believed that the prohibition of her grandmother had been suggested by her. Insensible, then, to the indisposition of Ruth, the cause of which she only too well guessed, she hastened, after a sad and silent supper, to leave her father and grandmother to seek that repose which the agitation of the day had rendered so necessary.





CHAPTER VIII.

A GRANDMOTHER'S DOUBTS.

"Their throat is an open sepulchre, with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips."—ROM. iii. 13.

MARGERY, left alone with David, was sitting by the great chimney; she appeared dejected, and from time to time sighed deeply. Hoping every day to see Rachel, once so gentle and submissive, return to her former ways, she had been unwilling to hurt her son's feelings by making any unpleasant remarks about his favourite daughter, whom, in his paternal pride, he considered incomparable, and far superior to her young companions. An excellent son, as well as a good father, he was surprised and grieved at the sorrow depicted on his mother's countenance; he asked anxiously the cause of this sorrow, and Margery at length, unburdening her heart, revealed to him the trouble which had for some time afflicted her.

I will not attempt to paint the astonishment

and grief of David. His character, naturally severe, exaggerating the offences of Rachel, he exhibited such fierce anger that Margery, alarmed at the probable consequences, did all she could to calm him. She succeeded after a long conversation, and even got him to promise to allow another week to pass without saying anything to his daughter; then he should be free, if things had not changed, to complain and strive to remedy them. This excellent mother hoped, by various schemes which she contemplated, to divert from the child who so deeply grieved her the storm which was gathering over her head.

David and Margery sat together later than usual that evening: they spoke of Ruth and her virtues, her gentleness, her modesty, her readiness to oblige, her indefatigable activity. They began to understand that piety alone can produce such fruits, and felt their respect for religion, the source of it, redoubled. They blessed the day which had brought the wandering Ruth amongst them. Indeed, only a short time had passed since her admission into the family, and how much good had already been effected by her means! Margery, until then so slightly instructed in the truths and practice of true faith, had now learnt to regard the business of salvation as the most important, or,

to speak more correctly, as the only important one in the world ; she consecrated, therefore, her heart and soul to it. She had learnt, moreover, to know what immense profit she could draw from even the ills which often afflicted her, and appreciated at length all that her Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ had done and suffered for her ; she had substituted a pious resignation to the divine will for the murmurs which often formerly rose in her heart. To whom did she owe this happy change and the peace which ensued from it ? It was due to the zeal with which Ruth had laboured to make known to her God, the obligations which his law imposes upon us, the supernatural strength which prayer imparts, and the eternal rewards which are promised to faithfulness unto the end. To arrive at this end, Ruth had neglected no means, no opportunity. Sometimes she led the conversation, in which salutary reflections, cleverly introduced, found a natural place ; sometimes she read a chapter from the Bible, a scriptural story, or a tract appropriate to the situation of Margery ; sometimes Ruth related touching anecdotes, or described the lives of the children of God, which she rendered more interesting still by the simplicity with which she told them. It was Aunt Jane from whom she had learned this precious knowledge, and she desired

to scatter around her the heavenly seed which had fructified so wonderfully in her own heart.

Ruth had also been devoting herself to the instruction of little Dolly, who, the next spring was to be confirmed. This child, of an excellent natural disposition, had only to be trained to her duties and put in the path of virtue to advance rapidly. Ruth threw herself with ardour into this important task without being checked by any difficulties it might involve. She might be seen, at the same time that she discharged diligently the daily duties entrusted to her, talking long with Dolly, and compelling her, as it were, by ingenious comparisons, by examples suitable to the subjects which she treated and to her own age, to understand the greatness of the act in which she was about to take part, and the touching goodness of God, who was willing to descend into her heart and establish there his kingdom. The rays of divine grace did not enlighten this pure soul—which had not yet abused any of its gifts—in vain ; for every one admired in little Dolly gentleness, obedience, application to her work—in a word, those simple virtues which give so great a charm to pious childhood. Ruth was not the last to observe the happy effects of her labours, and she experienced therefrom an exquisite joy ; for, after the pleasure of serving God, she

knew not any more sweet than that of drawing other souls into his service. She, however, sometimes surprised herself regretting riches, and the influence which they procure as a powerful means of effecting good, and it seemed to her at such times that she would have consecrated them all to this purpose. But reflection soon made her understand the dangers of a brilliant position, and, fearing her weakness, she thanked God for having placed her in a state sheltered from such temptations, and resolved more firmly than ever to do in her humble sphere all the good that lay in her power. How often had Aunt Jane encouraged her to this.

“Remember, my child,” that pious woman would say, “that however obscure a person may be in this world, there is no one who cannot contribute to the salvation of his brother, either by advice, by example, or especially by prayer. How many souls lost for ever would have enjoyed another lot if they had found more charity in those who, making profession of piety, are unfortunately strangers to that virtue from which all the others derive their value! How many believing that they have accomplished all the law, will have to render a strict account of his faults of omission to Him who has not only said, ‘Cease to do evil,’ but has added, ‘Learn to do well.’”

Let us renew our story.

Sophie, left alone after the departure of her numerous company, went to her bed-room and began to reflect upon what had passed during the afternoon. She recalled with grief and vexation the desire which each had expressed, at the instigation of Clara Graham, to see the pretty Rachel, and the air of raillery with which her friends reproached her for having kept Rachel away from their admiration. She understood perfectly that the secret fears of her vanity had been divined, and she hated in her heart both Clara and Rachel, and cursed the fatal occasion which had drawn her to connect herself with a country girl, so little worthy of being associated with her, and more than that, so well qualified to eclipse her. But the die was cast, she must introduce this new rival to her friends, or justify fully the suspicions of Clara, and so expose herself to the jests of her gay companions.

She had arrived at this conclusion when Susan came into the room. At a glance the latter perceived the cloud on the brow of her young mistress, and entered warmly into her accustomed character of comforter and flatterer. When she had learnt the cause of Sophie's trouble, far from calming it, she fanned with all her might the fire of jealousy against Rachel. She believed herself to have been

insulted by Rachel, and we may easily imagine what the desire of vengeance would be in a soul so degraded. The fact is, that the scrutinizing and practised look of Susan had some hours before detected in the eyes of Rachel, little skilful to dissemble, the virtuous indignation which her odious conversation and repulsive vauntings had excited. She understood what the wicked never forgive, the contempt which she inspired, and resolved to treat as an enemy one who had unconsciously mortally offended her.

We will not reproduce in all its details the conversation which took place between these two accomplices. We will only say that Susan, after having nourished the ill-feeling of Sophie against Rachel by exaggerating her beauty, her gentleness, and the successes which these advantages must necessarily procure her, offered her mistress, by way of consolation, the idea that the pic-nic, to which she hesitated so much to bring Rachel, might become a fruitful source of petty vengeance, if the latter gave herself any airs, and put their patience to too severe a trial. The well known sensitiveness of David respecting everything which could affect the honour of his family might be turned to profit. What should prevent him from knowing the presence of Rachel at

this party of pleasure, and of painting in whatever colours he chose the conduct of his daughter there—that daughter of whom he was so ridiculously proud? It was in this manner, then, that Rachel should be made to expiate her past triumph. Besides, before coming to this extremity, they might make use at least of this fear to secure her silence, and they would soon dissipate the greatest of her charms—that sincerity, that simplicity, which every one admired in her. They would take her then to other parties. A few praises would turn her head; they would teach her to covet trinkets incompatible with her position, and they would amuse themselves at the comic vanity which these ornaments would produce in her. If such were not the words of Susan, at least it was the gist of her conversation. This last idea appeared so funny, that she burst out into a fit of laughter; her gaiety insensibly infected Sophie, who at first had recoiled from such base wickedness; and from this moment the two busied themselves with the means of securing Rachel, whose resistance they feared.

“If it be only for this once,” said Susan, “she must absolutely be of our party, or Clara Graham will always be sneering.”

Sophie, exasperated by these last words, wrote

to Rachel, stating that she feared she should not see her for some days, and expressed the desire to speak to her about something that interested them both ; she concluded by asking her to come to her room the next morning at eight o'clock. Susan undertook to find an opportunity to deliver the note, and towards sunset the next day went to the farm. Poor Rachel ! if she could have known into what hands she had fallen, what would have been her horror at the false and perfidious friend who had alienated her from the one whose regard was so sincere and had already been so useful to her ! But pride, or rather flattered vanity, which ordinarily leads so far along the road to ruin, and which had at first drawn her near to Sophie, continued to blind her judgment, and hold her in bonds which she already wished to break, although she was far from knowing all her danger. After that melancholy supper on the Sunday evening, of which we spoke in the last chapter, Rachel went to bed, but could not sleep. It was the first time, since she could remember, that she had quitted her dear parents under a cloud of ill-will and displeasure. She had continued every evening to kiss her grandmother, and if during the day some slight misunderstanding had arisen between them, this moment effaced the last traces of it. But that evening she

had been satisfied with wishing her parents a cold good night. She went away, however, with eyes filled with tears, for on closing the door her look had met that of Margery, which painted too vividly the pain the conduct of her grandchild was causing her. A heart like that of Rachel's cannot see without anguish the grief of those it loves, especially when it is the cause of that grief. So between remorse and repentance, Rachel passed a sad night. After weeping a long time over her folly and wickedness, she resolved to amend her conduct and ask her grandmother's forgiveness. More calm now that she had arrived at a determination which was a necessity for her heart, she fell asleep towards midnight. She knew not, poor child, that resolutions, which are not grounded on God, and upon which the assistance of his grace has not been asked, soon vanish and share the lot of everything which belongs to our fragile and inconstant nature. But on more than one subject she wanted an experience which she could only acquire at a bitter cost.

It was towards the end of October, and at this season of the year the sun does not appear very early above the horizon; so Rachel on opening her eyes was astonished to see the light shining brightly across the panes. The morning rays penetrated

unobstructedly into her little room, for the trellis-work around which the flowers and the foliage interlaced themselves so gracefully but a short while ago, was now bare and leafless. Some scentless roses, here and there, still charmed the sight, and presented a last souvenir of the delightful season which had just passed away ; but all other traces of summer had died away. Rachel quickly dressed herself, and eager to attend upon her grandmother, hastened downstairs ; but on entering the parlour found that Ruth had been beforehand with her, and doubtless some time : for, Margery sitting near the fire had begun her breakfast, which Ruth had neatly placed upon a little table at her side. This sight inwardly irritated Rachel, who instead of being touched to find Ruth always there to repair her negligences, apparent or real, reproached her in her heart for these very attentions to Margery, since they seemed to her a silent reproach on her own conduct.

On these occasions the insinuations of Sophie always recurred to Rachel's mind, and were not repelled as they ought to have been. Neglect of duty makes us out of humour with ourselves, and ill-humour renders us unjust, and generally develops the secret and blameable feelings which we would keep concealed in our hearts. Thus Rachel was

in no way touched by the open and natural manner with which Ruth wished her good morning, or by the sad but tender look with which she accompanied her words. She went up to her grandmother, who received her kindly. Encouraged by this indulgence, she resumed her ordinary duties, and performed them with zeal and activity.

Towards the end of the day, which had been one of the finest that autumn, Margery expressed a wish to walk in the garden—a pleasure which she observed she should very seldom be able to enjoy hereafter. Leaning on the arm of Rachel and accompanied by Ruth, she ventured as far as the skirt of the wood, and sat down upon a rustic bench near the little stream. Ruth became pensive; for she could not help calling to mind, that it was on this same seat that, some months before, she had determined to accept the offer of the good people of the farm. She could not help, too, comparing sorrowfully the present feelings of Rachel towards her with those which then animated her.

Her reflections, however, were interrupted by the arrival of Dolly, who ran as fast as the little legs of Tommy, whose hand she held, would let her. She was full of the joy which she was about to give Ruth, and triumphantly delivered to her

a letter from Aunt Jane. Ruth, delighted indeed, rose to go away, and read the letter by herself, but, after a few minutes, returned to join the family, who, with the exception of David, were all gathered there.

It was an interesting sight, that of the venerable Margery sitting between her two granddaughters, whilst her only grandson rolled and frolicked about at her feet on the grass. From time to time he raised himself on the tip of his toes, and leaned his fresh and rosy cheek against his grandmother's, whose silvery hair mingled with the pretty flaxen curls of her dear child. Ruth contemplated with secret pleasure this family group, and thought how happy were those who could remain so united.

She was herself also happy at this moment, for the letter which she had just received contained good news. Everyone at home was well, and the health of her father continued to improve. He was now only kept to his chair by the stiffness of his legs, but the doctor gave hopes that he would by and by recover the use of them. After the fears which they had entertained for his life, his present state, however painful it might be, was still a happy one. In the meanwhile, her mother, being no longer confined by the thousand duties which the long illness of her husband entailed upon her,

could devote her time to her general occupations, and even take in work. Her father also employed some hours in making nets—an occupation which suited him better than any other, since he could do it without moving his body. Thus he not only utilized his time, but was relieved from that fatal *ennui* which he had experienced during his compulsory idleness—in a word, he was far from being absolutely wretched, for he derived from his entire resignation to the will of God the courage to suffer patiently his affliction, together with sentiments full of peace and consolation.

Such were the fruits of the touching instructions, and still more touching example, of Aunt Jane, who, as we have said, was “the angel in the house,” where she taught the love of Christ, enjoined the observance of His law, and represented the blissful peace of the children of God.

One thing alone in the letter pained and troubled Ruth. Aunt Jane spoke of the numerous debts which her poor parents had been compelled to contract during the calamitous time which they had passed through. The most assiduous toil could, only after a long period, place them in a position to gradually pay them off, and at the approach of winter a thousand wants began to make themselves felt. Ruth resolved to send home, by the first

opportunity, the little sum which she had already earned since her coming to the farm, and of which she had not spent a single penny on her own account : very different from so many young persons, all whose savings are generally wasted in objects of finery and superfluities, which their vanity makes indispensable to them. It was without a shadow of regret that Ruth sacrificed even what might be called necessities for her to the happiness of assisting her parents, and thus testifying her affection and gratitude.

The rest of the letter contained so much prudent advice, and so many pious reflections, that Ruth was pleased to read it to Margery, and the two sisters assembled in the garden. Rachel was deeply moved, and felt at the bottom of her heart how unjust had been the accusations of Sophie. If Ruth had been a worthless vagabond, as she had insinuated, would she receive such letters, and would she be the object of such tender solicitude to Aunt Jane ? The coldness which she had allowed to grow up between her and her friend now appeared insupportable. At heart Rachel had always loved Ruth, and she would more than once have thrown herself on her neck, and confessed how wrong she had been, had not obstinate pride and wicked self-love always kept her back. She

resolved to overcome her hesitation, and, full of this good resolution, regained the house, where she was about to prepare the supper, when she heard herself called cautiously across the little garden gate. She ran there and recognized Susan.

"Make haste," cried the latter; "I have been waiting an hour here to give you this note"—and she handed to her Sophie's letter. "I did not wish to show myself," she added, "for I thought that your old granny might have thought you were out rather late last night, and would blame us for it. But why that angry look? Have I done anything to displease you? Nothing at all, it seems to me. But good-bye; I have performed my commission; I must make haste back, for I have hardly time to reach home before dark."

Rachel, indignant at the manner in which this insolent girl had spoken of her grandmother, whom she had been accustomed to respect from her childhood, remained some moments stupefied and motionless at the gate. "Well, well," she thought to herself, "if Sophie does not get rid of that detestable girl, I will break with her altogether."

She then read the note, and resolved to go the next morning early to her pretended friend, not only to know what she had to say, but also to persuade her to part with her dangerous servant.

This last intention was doubtless praiseworthy ; but if, instead of taking this step herself, she had consulted those who were by right her guardians, she would have learnt that it is always imprudent for the inexperienced to communicate with the wicked, under whatever motive.





CHAPTER IX.

RACHEL'S REPENTANCE.

“When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness which he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive.”—EZEK. xviii. 27.

THE next morning at day-break, Rachel rose and hastened to Minster, where she had some commissions to perform for the house, in order to be able on her return to stop a little time with her friend.

Shall I relate all the arguments to which Sophie had recourse, to persuade Rachel, under the veil of a treacherous friendship, to accompany her to the pic-nic? The details would be too painful to chronicle; I will content myself by saying that after a long resistance, and a positive refusal, there came a sort of hesitation which, the wicked girl quickly noticing, she redoubled her efforts, and at length triumphed over Rachel, who, confident in her own strength, now ventured in the gladness of her heart to expose herself to danger.

Rachel had that morning left the farm more tranquil and better disposed than she had felt for a long time ; she returned to it agitated by a thousand fears. Her heart was troubled with remorse, but she consented for the first time in her life to deceive her grandmother, under circumstances, the iniquity of which she could not disguise from herself. Who would have thought that this young girl, of a character so frank and candid, incapable a few months before of the slightest dissimulation, could have come so rapidly to abuse the confidence and the liberty reposed in her? . Such may be the consequences of a single dangerous connection !

It must be said, however, in palliation of poor Rachel's conduct, that the courage which she had at first displayed in rejecting the proposals of Sophie, had only yielded to a fear of actually giving her friend pain, so much grief did the latter pretend to feel at a refusal which deprived her, as she said, of all the pleasure of the party. Whilst speaking thus, she overwhelmed Rachel with caresses, and showed her the pretty dress which she had prepared for the occasion. This sight alone would not have sufficed to decide Rachel, but her decision once taken, it was not without its temptations for her vanity, the more so, as the perfidious Susan and her

mistress exclaimed how pretty she would look in a similar robe.

It was agreed that the next two or three days should be devoted to making their dresses, and that the day before the pic-nic, Sophie should ask Margery to allow her granddaughter to come to her at twelve o'clock, and pass the afternoon with her. The more surely to obtain the consent of Margery, Sophie was to add that she would be quite alone, as her father was away for some days.

All these arrangements made, Rachel, as we have said, returned to the farm, a prey to a thousand thoughts, until then unknown to her. Naturally true, she felt a terrible repugnance at the idea of deceiving, and especially deceiving parents like hers. She could not conceal from herself too the impropriety which there was in going alone with a girl as young as herself, to a gathering where she would in all probability meet several young men unknown to her, and with whose character and manners she was altogether unacquainted. Then the possibility of meeting some one from Minster, who might tell all at the farm ; and the anger of her father, whose temper she knew was very severe ; these thoughts, and especially the latter, threw her into a cruel perplexity. If at times her vanity flashed across her uneasiness, and afforded her some

rays of pleasure whilst dreaming of the finery with which she had proposed to deck herself out, these short moments of hollow satisfaction were quickly succeeded by a bitter pang, inseparable from the thought of the fatal pic-nic. So true is it, that innocent pleasures are the only real ones, and every enjoyment, into which the least sentiment of fear or remorse can creep, is poisoned.

Nearly a week passed away, keeping Rachel in the tortures which we have described, and to which was joined another which we have not mentioned, and which however was not the least; the vexation and embarrassment she felt, on finding herself obliged to endure the trusting and loving looks of her parents, whilst in her heart, she was preparing to betray that trust. Her eyes would fill with tears, and a blush suffuse her face when she thought of the sorrow and anger which would have immediately replaced that affection, could they have penetrated her secret. There is not a greater punishment for an upright and elevated soul, than to see itself the object of an esteem and confidence of which it knows itself to be unworthy. The confusion which it feels sometimes, indeed, proves salutary, and awakens a virtuous energy which pushes aside every obstacle in the path of righteousness, and destroys every internal ground of reproach.

We can easily conceive, then, what Rachel had to suffer when Sophie, according to the preconcerted plan, arrived the following Friday, and presented to Margery with the utmost nonchalance, her request. The hypocrite laid frequent stress on the dismal loneliness in which the absence of her father left her, and obtained, not without some trouble, what she desired. Margery, always ready to oblige, had not the courage to refuse decidedly ; and not having more than vague suspicions as to the causes of the change which she remarked in her granddaughter followed the rule which she had always laid down, namely, to gratify her whenever it was in her power. However, in this instance she did reproach herself a little for her weakness, and looking at Rachel with a glance full of affection, she seemed to await at least a word of thanks. But Rachel dropped her eyes with embarrassment, and could not find in her heart the fatal courage to thank her good grandmother for what would have been so lively a cause of grief had she known the truth.

Sophie, however, thanked her enough for both, and, worthy rival of Susan, laughed on going out at the blushes of Rachel and her confused manner. Then she added, in a whisper, "that all the preparations were complete, and they would have a jolly day to-morrow."

These last words produced in the harassed soul of the guilty child the effect of a drop of water in a vase already full. Filled for several days with apprehensions, shame, and remorse, her heart could hold no more. Astounded many times during the visit of Sophie, at her assurance and falsity, her eyes seemed to open, and she understood at length that her friend's conduct at that moment could not have been a first attempt at deceit; for it is not in a day, she thought, that one acquires so deplorable an assurance in committing evil. It was then a perverted heart, worthy in all respects of that Susan whom she had chosen for her confidante. The last words which Sophie addressed to her, and which we have reported above, completed her indignation.

“And it is with such contemptible creatures as these that I have associated myself,” she said to herself shuddering, and bursting into tears rushed to her room to conceal from all eyes her grief and agitation. Oh! what she suffered at that moment! how deeply she deplored the day when, for the first time, she had met Sophie, and especially that day when she had consented to the imprudent step of to-morrow, the very thought of which humiliated her now, and alarmed her for the future! She could not see any way to with-

draw herself from the wicked plot into which they had entrapped her, for to follow her first project was impossible ; to renounce it was to draw down upon her the anger, and perhaps the vengeance, of the worthless couple whom she had found out when it was too late. Oh, if there was but one person whom she dared to trust and ask advice from ! But, no, she had herself created her cruel isolation. Oh, how she regretted now the friendship, truly worthy of that name, which she had rejected with such deep ingratitude. The sweet virtues of Ruth reappeared to her mind in all their original charm, and made the contrast, which the defects and conduct of Sophie presented, only more glaring and odious. She could not comprehend the blindness which had prevented her from sooner perceiving what then struck her so clearly. She felt doubly the value of the treasure which she had lost, and her regard for Ruth, suppressed only by the wicked insinuations of Sophie, revived in her heart with tenfold intensity.

At this moment a light noise made her raise her head, which she held in both her hands ; the door opened gently, and Ruth appeared. She approached timidly, and, sitting down near Rachel, took one of her hands, and clasped it affectionately in her own.

"I know not," she said, "whether you understand the motive of my visit, but I cannot, my dear Rachel, bear any longer to see you unhappy ; for you are so, I know : do not attempt to deny it ; and what has she done to you whom you once treated as a friend, to alienate your affection ? Oh ! what pain you have given me for many days."

"Is it possible ?" exclaimed Rachel, throwing herself upon the neck of her first and real friend. "Is it possible that you still have any love for me ? If you knew how unworthy I am of it, if you knew all my faults, oh, I am sure, Ruth, you would only despise me."

"I know all," replied Ruth, with warmth ; "and, more than ever I desire to comfort you, my dear Rachel, and to spare you further pain."

After some moments devoted to the happiness of so sweet a reconciliation, Rachel, thoroughly repentant and touched deeply by the generous conduct of Ruth, began with the amiable frankness of her character to make a circumstantial confession of what had happened. She was going to paint her offences in all their breadth and depth, without seeking to attenuate one, when, to her great astonishment, Ruth, eager to avert from her the painful embarrassment which she must feel, re-

peated that she knew all, and to convince Rachel, related to her what follows :—

Gertrude, that faithful servant who had been dismissed from Mr. Passmore's on account of the calumnies invented against her by Sophie, was a poor widow whose only means of subsistence was occasional charring at different houses in Minster. Reduced by the wickedness of which she had been the victim to extreme indigence, she at length became seriously ill ; her good name, however, interested many in her favour, and her neighbours came to nurse her. Ruth, informed, of this distressing circumstance, hastened to offer her all the consolation which lay in her power. Thanks to the charitable care of her friends, she eventually recovered, sooner, in fact, than was expected, and, recommended by old Margery, was taken into his service by Colonel Longton's steward, where she was employed in the menial offices about the great house. But she still regretted her former master, Mr. Passmore, whom she had served for a long time, and to whom she was much attached.

Some few days before the last events of our story, this same Gertrude had gone to Ruth and told her that she had sad news to communicate. A needlewoman, a friend of hers, had been sent for to Mr. Passmore's to assist in making dresses

for Miss Passmore and one of her companions. She had been placed in a small chamber close by Sophie's bed-room, from which it was only separated by a thin partition ; here, without any attempt on her part, she had heard the whisperings of Susan and her mistress, who conversed sometimes about the means which they used to deceive Mr. Passmore, sometimes about their desire to drag Rachel into their net, and also about the dislike and even hatred which, for different reasons, each had conceived against her. The needle-woman had understood by their sneers and jests, that the poor child was being deliberately deceived, and full of the sad discovery—for the sempstress loved and respected David Meredith and his family—she had spoken about it to Gertrude, of whose attachment to Ruth, however, she was ignorant. The latter, on her part, knowing how devoted Ruth was to Rachel, determined to go and inform her of the danger which threatened her friend. Thus Ruth had learnt, with as much surprise as pain, all that the reader is acquainted with.

During this revelation the eyes of Rachel, and indeed her whole attitude, betrayed successively indignation, grief, and shame at having allowed herself to be drawn into such an alliance. It was, however, difficult for her to believe in the excessive

falsehood and blackness which she had discovered in her to whom, but the evening before, she had given the name of friend. In her turn, she related to Ruth facts which the latter had not yet learnt respecting this fatal connection, and, shedding very bitter tears, made a full confession of all her faults. Oh! now she could recognize the sweet goodness of a heart which she had misconceived. With what care, too, did Ruth avoid in her words whatever could add to the embarrassment of Rachel! What tender compassion for the anguish which her friend felt at that moment! what forgetfulness of the slights she herself had received! She only dreamt how she might console the repentant Rachel. But whilst displaying so tender an indulgence for what was personal to herself, Ruth did not imitate those worldly-minded friends who, with culpable weakness, hide from those, who know not the peril which threatens them, the precipice, instead of leading them away from it. Far otherwise was it with her. Sharing, indeed, the grief of her friend, Ruth nevertheless believed that she ought to point out to her, as well as she could, the forgetfulness of her duties of which she had been guilty, her progress, already so rapid in the path of disobedience and pride, and the dangers to which she had so lightly exposed herself. Then she spoke to her

of that divine aid which her weakness required, and which could alone protect her from the rocks against which she had nearly dashed herself to pieces. She then brought her to admire the goodness of God who had shown her her weakness, only to compel her, as it were, to take refuge in his bosom ; like a tender father who, holding his son by the hand, leads him to the brink of the precipice which he would have him avoid, lets him measure its depth, and then, at the moment that fear seizes him, or he feels giddiness overpowering him, takes him up by a strong arm and removes him from so perilous a position.

The heart of Ruth, always animated by a charitable zeal, and at this moment, moreover, full of the desire to be useful to her friend, addressed to her such touching and persuasive words, that Rachel, truly repentant, felt no other wish than that of repairing her past faults. As we may easily imagine, she began by renouncing her plans for the morrow, and taking measures to avoid the solicitations of Sophie. But what excuse could she make to Margery for not accepting the invitation with which she had appeared delighted. Whilst these two friends were reflecting on this difficulty, Dolly came to announce that supper was on the table, and they arose to follow her. When they

entered the room, Margery and David were already at the table.

“What, you also late!” said the latter to Ruth, in a tone half-reproachful, half-laughing: “this morning I would have laid any wager that it was impossible for you to have done wrong: it would have taken much to have made me believe it; but it isn’t right, by the beard of my ancestor, Llewellyn, to make an honest man wait for his supper when he has been working all day in the open air, and returns home half-famished.”

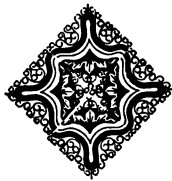
Saying this, he proved the truth of his last words by the astonishing rapidity with which he devoured a large dish of Irish-stew. Ruth replied to this attack with her usual gentleness and good humour, and the conversation was kept up pleasantly to the end of the meal.

David, since the conversation he had had with his mother on the subject of Rachel, had ceased to bestow on her his accustomed marks of affection. He had noticed daily, with his own eyes, the justness of the complaints of his good mother, and his anger increasing in proportion, would have broken out at once, had it not been for the promise which Margery had extorted from him to be patient for some time further. To this motive was added the extreme pain which he felt at having to reprehend

a daughter so beloved, and who, until then, had never merited reproach. The unusual coldness of David had not escaped the notice of Rachel, whose heart was still dutiful, and at this moment the stern look of her father disturbed that calm peace which the angelic conduct of Ruth had restored to the mind of her friend. What excellent plans for the future crowded into her brain! what happiness she anticipated from the friendship, more tender and more solid than ever, which was to spring up between her and that precious guide whose inestimable value she could now appreciate! Some hours before, under the influence of perverse counsels and examples, when she was being drawn to her destruction, the lines of her face bore the impress of the trouble which agitated her. It was enough, however, for her heart to be turned towards Heaven. A resolution to abandon the evil path, and to walk henceforth in that of her duties, restored calm to her mind and serenity to her looks. Her eyes were fixed now on her parents, whom she deeply regretted to have grieved; now on the author of her happy change; at times, in spite of herself, tears would force themselves into her eyes, but they were not bitter tears, their fountain lay deep down in her better feelings.

None of these new emotions passed unperceived

by Margery, whose natural sagacity was on this occasion whetted by her maternal solicitude. She divined well that some explanation had taken place between the two girls, on seeing an affectionate air substituted for the coldness which had existed between them for some time past. She drew from this a happy augury, and displayed during supper a cheerfulness which communicated itself to David and the rest of the family. It was a long interval after supper before bed-time, but it was pleasantly filled by the anecdotes of the good farmer, who dearly loved to hear his own voice. Every one then retired, less sad than on the preceding days, and with good hope for the morrow.





CHAPTER X.

A TRUE SAMARITAN.

"But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was : and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine."—LUKE X. 33, 34.



HERE is a virtue which forces itself irresistibly on the notice of every heart, which adorns—if that be possible—innocence itself, and clothes repentance in the most witching garb. This virtue, which all admire, even those who do not possess it, is sincerity, a sentiment so noble, that it dreads and repels praise not merited, and esteem not deserved. It recognizes frankly its faults, and avows them unreservedly. A mean soul never feels this virtue.

Retired to their room, Ruth and Rachel, instead of going to bed, talked over several little plans respecting the course to be adopted the next morning. There was no time to be lost, since the faithless Sophie must be informed early that she was not to expect Rachel. After some hesitation as to the

kind of excuse she should make, Rachel exclaimed suddenly—

“Oh, why all this thinking and planning? Why should I fear to repair, as far as it is in my power, the fault which I have committed in helping to deceive Sophie’s father? Yes, let her know how much I repent it, how deeply horror-struck I am at my former conduct, and perhaps God, who has held me back on the brink of the abyss, will touch her heart by this means. It is true,” she added, clasping Ruth’s hand, “that she has not, like me, a friend to watch over her.”

“Perhaps so,” replied the latter, smiling; “but she has what is above all earthly succour—a celestial messenger always at her side, and whose inspirations will never be wanting to her, if she will open her heart to Him.”

The two friends continued to pour out their hearts to one another in perfect confidence, and experienced a great pleasure in this communion, of which they had been so long deprived. Rachel’s tears flowed afresh as Ruth painted to her the affliction of her grandmother, when her prolonged absence interrupted those attentions which she had been accustomed to receive from her.

This conversation, continued far into the night, was not without its effect; and when the two girls

fell asleep, their measures had been taken to secure the good so happily begun.

The next morning the surprise of Ruth was great, when, on opening her eyes, she saw Rachel on her knees beside the bed. Across the joy spread over her face she perceived the traces of recent emotion ; of this, her eyes, still red and wet, left no doubt.

"What ! already dressed !" exclaimed Ruth, with astonishment. "I fear we must be late ; our sitting up last night is the cause."

"No, it is still early," replied Rachel. "Listen to me patiently, Ruth, for I have something to say to you before I let you get up. You must know, then, that having awoke very early, all that passed yesterday came back to my mind, and made it impossible for me to go to sleep again. Then I reflected on the manner in which I had spent the last month or so, and felt more than ever my sinfulness towards God and his goodness for me. I wept, but the tears were not bitter ones."

"Oh, He Himself spoke to your heart," cried Ruth, "and His voice is never accompanied by terror or trouble."

"It is well that I have suffered what I have," replied Rachel ; "for after having from the depths of my heart implored pardon for my offences, I

experienced great tranquillity, and it seemed to me that my prayers had been heard. Then my thoughts dwelt upon my father and my dear grandmother, and upon the grief I had caused them. How ungrateful I must have been to have repaid all their kindness in the manner I have ! I longed for daylight to arrive, to let them know by my attentions and solicitude the change which had taken place in my heart, and the desire I have to repair my errors. Suddenly all my odious plans of deceit for this very day rushed upon me ; I knew well that it was easy to conceal them, and that my father would never suppose me capable either of forming them or being associated with such schemes. But it was just this thought which most afflicted me, and I felt that this disgraceful secret would be an enormous weight on my heart, so long as it remained hidden there. I felt that the confidence of my parents, instead of cheering me, would cover me with confusion. Then Heaven inspired me with a courageous resolution. I rose immediately, well assured that my grandmother would be awake. I went softly to her room, and opened the door gently. She asked me, with a smile, what made me up so early. I approached her bed, and kissed her, inwardly calling upon God to sustain me in my good purpose. I was heard, Ruth. You

may guess the rest. Yes, my grandmother now knows all. I have disguised nothing, extenuated nothing. Oh, how light my heart is now ! But if you knew the manner in which my grandmother listened to the account of all my faults ! I never could have believed it. Every moment I expected a burst of anger, but she never once reproached me. Tears rolled plentifully down her cheeks ; but when I had finished, she opened her arms, and clasped me to her heart, saying that I had recompensed her for all that she had suffered ; that, if she had been informed by others of my faults and dissimulation, it would never have been possible for her to fix her trust and affection on me again ; that I had indeed been very culpable, but that my candour now completely consoled and assured her. On the other hand, she appeared very indignant against Sophie and the infamous Susan. I never recollect having heard her speak of any person with so much contempt and severity. Poor mother ! how she thanked God for having delivered me out of their hands ; and you, Ruth, for having been instrumental in saving me !

“ At length father came in, and she said to him, ‘ Come, David, kiss your daughter, she deserves it now.’ He hesitated, but I sprang into his arms, and he kissed me as affectionately as

ever. We were all three of us so moved, that neither dreamed of breaking the silence. In a few moments, however, grandmother said to me, 'Go, my child, and awake Ruth, and bring her here, for I cannot wait any longer without seeing her.' Get up, then, for I have delivered my message."

I shall dwell neither upon the joy so keen and pure which the narrative of her friend gave Ruth, nor upon the reception which the two girls met with. I will only add, that David and Margery were not content to bless, in this instance, as they had done a thousand times before, the arrival of Ruth under their hospitable roof, but they regarded and treated her henceforth as a dear daughter, who had become necessary to the happiness of the inmates of the farm.

Faithful to her resolution, Rachel went early to Sophie, who was alone in the garden, and told her briefly but firmly her new resolution, and the motives which had decided her to renounce the pic-nic. The latter appeared at first astounded, but quickly recovering her usual assurance, burst out into a loud laugh.

"All that is very fine, my dear," she exclaimed; "but your reflections appear to me to come a little too late for you to have the merit of them. I guess pretty well who has put them into your

head, and I will repay both you and her for the pleasure which they give me."

Rachel turned away without replying to the sarcasm or heeding the threat which it contained. Devoted entirely to her duties, this day was one of the happiest she had passed for a long time. She felt that she could now bear without shrinking the affectionate and gratified looks of her fond parents, and was continually thankful for the happy courage with which she had dared to render herself worthy of them.

On going that night to her bed, Rachel could not help comparing the present state of her soul with what it would have been at the same hour, had she accompanied Sophie Passmore to the proposed pic-nic ; and she fell asleep praising God for the mercy which He had shown her, in saving her from the commission of so wicked a sin.

We will now inform our readers of the result of a long conversation which took place between David and his mother immediately after Rachel's confession. Nothing could paint their indignation at the conduct of Sophie. Mr. Passmore deceived and laughed at by his own child ; the honest Gertrude calumniated, and then turned out of doors, as her wicked young mistress had herself

boasted ; the net spread with so much coolness and malice for their own dear child. As all these circumstances rose up in their minds, they felt more and more what a mercy it was that Rachel should have escaped the danger, and what gratitude they owed to God first, then to the excellent Ruth, who had so well performed towards their daughter the part of a guardian angel.

Margery and David asked themselves what was their duty towards Mr. Passmore, so unfeelingly betrayed. After much reflection they came to the conclusion that they ought to warn him of what was passing in his house, and the manner in which his confidence was being responded to ; for, wrong as it may be, to divulge unnecessarily the misconduct of a neighbour, it would still be more wrong to allow by our silence disorders to exist which could easily be prevented. It was, then, decided that as soon as Mr. Passmore returned, David should go to him and inform him of everything he had learnt. And, now, not to have to recur to this sad incident and its consequences, we will anticipate events a little, and remark, that David carried out his intention ; that the indignation and grief of Mr. Passmore were intense ; that he repented bitterly not having brought up his daughter more simply, and with more love for her

duties, and cursed a thousand times the vanity which had led him astray. Susan was ignominiously dismissed and Gertrude taken back; whilst Sophie, whom her father wished to separate from the dangerous connections she had formed, was sent to Chester to spend two or three months with a sister of her mother's, whose severity and strictness were well calculated to discipline her niece's character. She there gathered some good fruit from the contrast which she could not but draw between the kindness and indulgence of her father, and the rigour with which she was there treated. A young cousin, a daughter of this aunt, a virtuous and amiable girl, completed by her advice and example, the reform of Sophie; and on her return home, this child, of whom her father had had so much to complain, became happily a comfort and consolation to him.

As to Rachel, she received very shortly a new proof of the good which invariably results even in temporal matters, from acting frankly and openly, for, at the instigation of Susan, furious at what had transpired, Sophie, to avenge herself on the desertion of Rachel, wrote to her grandmother the details of what had been planned between her and her granddaughter, believing that the latter, whilst denouncing her, had probably

disguised the part which she had agreed to take in the affair. Margery handed the letter to Rachel, in order to let her see more clearly from what an ambush she had escaped; then placing her hand upon the head of the young girl, who was kneeling before her, said, "Thank God, my dear, for having been sincere; for if you had been able to receive my caresses with such a secret on your mind, never, never could I have reposed any trust in you, or," she added, imprinting a most affectionate motherly kiss on her forehead, "loved you as I now do."

A month after these events, Ruth was sitting by Margery, reading to her; Rachel was trying to make her little brother go to sleep on her knees; the day was near its close, and Dolly had not come in, though the time at which she generally returned from school was long since past. They were beginning to grow uneasy about her prolonged absence, when she scampered in out of breath and scarcely able to speak. Recovering a little, she at last told them that on leaving school she saw a lot of persons collected in the road, and that on going up to discover what had taken place, she found an old woman senseless, whom the people were carrying along on a stretcher. They had found her lying at the foot of a tree, and were now taking her to some place of shelter. The

constable asked the woman some questions when she appeared to recover her senses, but she could not speak a word. Dolly, induced somewhat by curiosity, but also by a feeling of pity for the unfortunate woman, had followed the crowd ; then perceiving that it was late, had run home to the farm without stopping.

Ruth, compassionating the sad fate of the poor creature, asked where they had taken her to. Having learnt that it was to a poor but respectable family, whose indifference to religion, however, was well known, she expressed to Margery her fear that no one, perhaps, would endeavour to supply her with that kind of help of which she might stand most in need. Perhaps she would die ; perhaps the poor soul would enter eternity without any one venturing to speak to her of the God who was about to judge her, of the Christ who had died for her. Alarmed at this thought, Ruth begged permission to go and see whether she could be of any use to the poor woman. Objections were suggested—such as the impropriety of presenting herself at that hour at the house of persons she knew little of, and who, perhaps, might receive her with little courtesy ; but especially the distance and the darkness, which rendered it imprudent for her to go so far alone, was laid much stress on. Ruth,

however, appeared so distressed at not being able to carry out her charitable purpose, that David, who had entered whilst Dolly was telling her tale, removed all difficulties by proposing to accompany her, and taking something to the poor woman as an excuse for their late visit. Honest David, in doing this, followed the impulse of a heart naturally compassionate ; and he was also delighted to gratify the excellent Ruth, whom he had always appreciated since her arrival at Springfield, whilst the eminent service which she had recently rendered Rachel, by saving her from the greatest of all dangers, had made her dear to him as his own child.

Matters being thus arranged, Ruth and David, lantern in hand, set out for the village. Rachel wished much to accompany them, but she was indispensable at home, and, moreover, too well instructed in her real duty not to understand that it is more agreeable to God that she should perform those which He had Himself traced out for her, than neglect them in order to indulge a charitable impulse which in this case was unnecessary. It would be well if all who make profession of piety would remember that the sacrifice of their own inclinations—the most difficult of all sacrifices—is precisely that which their Lord and Master most esteems ; and that to follow the inspiration of their

zeal, so that it may be acceptable, no duty ought to suffer—in a word, that obligatory works ought to be preferred to those of simple devotion, or those of a purely attractive character.

Arrived at the outhouse, where the poor woman had been laid, Ruth perceived her stretched upon a pallet of straw, the end of a flickering candle alone lighting up this bed of suffering, and casting a pale radiance around. Whilst David went into the house, to acquaint its inmates with the object of his visit, Ruth proceeded to the corner where the poor woman was lying. A broken cup and a battered pot, which had contained tea, lay beside her. Her short and rapid breathing, as well as the hectic hue of her cheeks, and the fire that flashed from her eyes, indicated but too plainly that she was suffering from a burning fever. The poor creature appeared astonished at the sight of the gentle figure which approached her; and, deeply touched at the tone of interest in which Ruth questioned her about her condition, replied in a few low-spoken words. Ruth was glad to find that a doctor had been to see her, and that he did not think her symptoms dangerous, at least for the present. He was of opinion, however, that they betokened the commencement of an illness which might become serious, in consequence of the exhausted state in which the sufferer appeared to be.

Ruth was astonished at the tone in which the poor woman spoke, and the manner in which she expressed herself, for her tone and manner scarcely harmonized with the situation to which she appeared reduced. After reflecting for a few minutes, Ruth went to seek David, and entreated him to let her remain the night with this wretched creature ; "for," she urged, "it may perhaps be the only opportunity I shall have to speak to her of God and her conscience, if, as the doctor says, the illness is likely to turn out very bad." Not wishing to wound her feelings by a refusal, David, with considerable reluctance, posted back alone to Springfield. When, on her return to the bed of the sufferer, Ruth informed her that she intended to pass the night with her, tears of gratitude glistened in her eyes. The young nurse soon discovered, by the questions she quietly put now and then, that the soul of this unfortunate woman was in a more deplorable condition than her body. The night, however, was well employed by Ruth ; her exhortations were touching, vivid, and urgent. She did not speak, however, before she had invoked God to place upon her lips words of persuasion and salvation. And in his mercy He had heard her prayer, for the poor outcast, whose features and language expressed nothing but desolation, and

almost despair, at first, cried out suddenly, clasping her hands, "O God, Thou hast not entirely abandoned me ; Thou hast sent me a comforting angel ! Oh, madam," she continued, addressing Ruth, "you would be horror-struck if you knew me—if my faults, or rather my crimes, were revealed to you" ; and she covered her face with her hands, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Oh, no, no ; do not fear that," replied Ruth, touched with the liveliest pity ; "remember rather the words of our compassionate Saviour, who said, 'There is more joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, than over ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance' ; and, 'I am come to save that which was lost.' The Gospels are full of these consoling promises ; it is for sinners that they were uttered. Amongst all the Divine attributes, mercy is the one which our God would have us admire the most."

The sick woman continued to weep in silence, but her looks already revealed a less painful agitation. Ruth, fearing to fatigue her by talking too long, sat near her, and prayed secretly that her heart might be filled with that repentance which could alone obtain for her the pardon of her crimes.

Before morning, Ruth had the happiness to find her patient well disposed to receive the visit of

Dr. Blessington, the worthy rector of Minster; and this success made her forget the fatigues of that sad night.

Profiting by a moment when Nancy Goodall—for that was the name of the poor woman—appeared asleep, Ruth left her shortly after daybreak. She went direct to the parsonage, and after having explained to her spiritual pastor the state of the poor woman, and the words which had escaped her, she left the affair in his hands, and returned immediately to Springfield.

On arriving there, she found them all in deep trouble. Little Tommy had, during the night, been attacked with the croup, which excited the greatest uneasiness. The doctor had not, however, lost all hope of saving him; but David, who had only this son, whom he loved dearly, was overwhelmed with alarm. Old Margery, whose age prevented her from being active, was, moreover, detained in bed by a severe attack of rheumatism. Ruth redoubled her efforts on this sad occasion; all, in fact, took a pride in exerting themselves, till at length Heaven had pity on the afflicted family. The child recovered, and peace and gratitude succeeded to cruel fears; but for nearly eight days Ruth had been unable to return to the unfortunate Nancy.

However, she had learnt, with the most lively

satisfaction, from the rector, the success of her efforts towards the poor stranger. He had found her, he said, quite disposed to receive his ministrations, and, since her reconciliation with God, she appeared relieved of a great weight, so that her health even improved. The fever lasted only a few days, but left her in a very prostrate condition. The doctor, indeed, thought that her constitution was too exhausted for her to live very long.

As soon as it was possible, Dr. Blessington had the wretched wayfarer removed to better quarters, and, when Ruth and Rachel went to see her, they found her lying on an easy bed, surrounded with a comfort and cleanliness that contrasted strongly with the state in which she was a few days before; the sister of the rector was by her side, holding a plate from which she eat strengthening food. It was thus that the good physician of her soul strove to soften the ills of her poor body, so worn by the fatigues and privations endured for a series of long years.

On perceiving Ruth, Nancy uttered a cry of joy, and expressed to her the most touching gratitude. "She owed her," she said, "more than life, for she was the first to illumine with a ray of hope her soul, so long plunged in the darkness of despair."

Ruth contemplated with emotion that face now calm and resigned, and was, as well as Rachel, edified by what the sufferer told them of the goodness of God towards her. They asked her cautiously, however, some questions as to the place where she generally lived, and the circumstances which had brought her to Minster-on-Lea.

The invalid sighed, and, after reflecting a moment, said: "I will undergo the deep humiliation which I have deserved by relating to you the sad history of my life. It will be a useful lesson, and furnish you with an experience which I have purchased at the price of long suffering, and which, but for you, I should, perhaps, have paid for with my poor soul. I have only this means of proving to you my gratitude; may God bless my intention, and give me strength to reveal to you all the errors and misfortunes of my life."

The two girls agreed to come to her the following afternoon, which was Sunday, to hear that history which they desired so anxiously to know, and returned to Springfield, resolved to be punctual on the morrow.



CHAPTER XI.

HISTORY OF NANCY GOODALL.

"To bear no malice or hatred in my heart; To keep my hands from picking and stealing, and my tongue from evil-speaking, lying, and slandering."—THE CATECHISM.

I WAS born, said Nancy Goodall, near the little town of Rockton, in Derbyshire. My father had grown old in the service of a family whose ancestors had lived for several centuries at Oakleigh, and whose present representatives were much respected by the inhabitants of the village, where its charities stood recorded in almshouses and legacies—monuments more durable than brass and marble. My mother, entrusted with the charge of the mansion during the time when the Bancrofts resided in London, and with many of the domestic arrangements when they were at home, had won their favour by her attachment and excellent conduct. Mrs. Bancroft was exceedingly kind to me, paid for my schooling, and, charmed with the intelligence which I displayed, kept me

near her, especially after the loss of her two children, with whom I had been permitted in our juvenile days to associate. At twelve, I could read, write, and work better than most girls of my age. I was beloved by the servants, to whom I rendered cheerfully all the little services I could. My heart was good, and the sight of a poor person gave me so much pain that I frequently entreated my friends to give me permission, as well as the means to assist them.

My mistress observed all these qualities, and hoped one day to see her care rewarded, and her little *protégée* a good and honest girl, whom she could admit into her service. She had a lady's-maid, who began to get old and infirm, and whose long tried faithfulness merited the rest which her mistress proposed to give her as soon as she should have initiated me in all the little arts which had rendered her so useful in the house. At sixteen I was quite capable of replacing her.

Two years before, I had lost my father, and my mother, whom the benevolence of Mrs. Bancroft had maintained since that misfortune, had also just been taken from me, in consequence of a fall which had deprived her of the use of her legs, and which kept her for some months on a bed of suffering.

It was at this time that I was appointed lady's-

maid to my benefactress, and my predecessor had nothing else to do than to instruct me in my new duties and see that I performed them. Thus was rewarded a long life of fidelity and duty. And ought not such to be the lot of all servants who, by their services and devotion, have rendered themselves worthy to be regarded as members of the family to which their youth, strength, and zeal have been unreservedly consecrated ?

My future began under the most auspicious circumstances, and, but for an unfortunate fault, which was not corrected, perhaps, with sufficient severity at first, I might have led a quiet and an innocent life, instead of falling into sins, the humiliating confession of which will, I trust, prove a warning to others.

This fault, the consequences of which have been so fatal to me, was the pernicious faculty of inventing a thousand little stories, in which the truth went for nothing. It appeared, perhaps, more amusing than dangerous in a child ; but this faculty grew at last into a habit of lying which became incorrigible. It was immaterial to me whether a thing was true or false, I denied or affirmed it as I liked ; and, provided I injured no person, I persuaded myself that there was nothing wrong in telling a fib. I believed myself still more guiltless

if the object of the falsehood was to justify me or my companions.

If I could find it in my heart to reproach my good mistress with anything, it would be for having shown too great an indulgence with respect to this fatal disposition, which has been the source of all the misfortunes and errors of my life ; a terrible example, which ought to teach those who are entrusted with the education of youth, that the first virtue to be inculcated in the heart of the young is the love of truth, even in the least things.

My companions were the first to perceive that I was what they called a story-teller, and distrusted my tales. The faithful Mary, whom I had replaced, in spite of her friendship for me, could not help warning my mistress, hoping that her rebukes would have more effect than the precepts full of kindness which she had so often endeavoured to enforce upon me.

Although sufficiently awed by the displeasure and reproaches of Mrs. Bancroft, I ventured to observe in my defence that I had never invented anything which could harm a single person, and that to tell a falsehood to excuse my faults, or those of others, did not appear to me to be a great offence.

“ If you had better recollected,” she would reply,

“what I have so often said to you about the horror with which every sin ought to inspire a Christian, you would not now regard as a small thing a habit which constantly leads you to offend God. You cannot be ignorant that the least untruth is displeasing to Him ; and if you accustom yourself to commit a fault without repugnance, because it does not appear a grave one to you, you are far from having towards God those sentiments which I have endeavoured to instil into you. Be certain, moreover, that if you accustom yourself to violate the truth in things which seem to you immaterial, the day will come when that detestable habit will draw you into faults, and perhaps into crimes, which are now far from your thoughts and your heart.”

These words made me burst into tears, for in truth my intentions were not bad, and the idea of becoming a criminal caused me inexpressible pain and alarm.

After this warning I kept a check upon myself for some time ; but if I managed in many instances to master this unfortunate propensity, I cannot recall without deep grief a feeling which about this time began to develope itself, and the consequences of which have rendered me during so many years both miserable and guilty.

I was approaching my twentieth year, and until

then the life I had led was marked neither by great vices nor by real virtues. Never having been what is called a pious girl, I attended with a sort of indifference the outward observances of religion. The opportunity only was wanting for the outbreak of my evil passions ; and when that presented itself, I found myself without strength to subdue them.

There was at Oakleigh a girl about my own age, whose low state of health caused the greatest uneasiness. Mrs. Bancroft had brought her from the wretched cottage where her parents lived in the deepest poverty, to the mansion, and superintended herself the execution of the doctor's instructions. The gentleness and gratitude of Fanny Palmer attached to her not only her benefactress, but those who nursed her during her long illness. It was on this occasion that, for the first time in my life, the wicked sentiment of jealousy sprang up in my heart. Had I been accustomed to listen to the warnings of my conscience, I should have suppressed at their birth the fatal impressions which began to agitate me ; but flighty and thoughtless, I indulged without reflection all the evil feelings excited within me against the poor invalid. In spite of my carelessness, I could not help making between her and myself a comparison which was not to my advantage, as she had none of the defects for which I

was continually reprimanded. The facility I had of making up stories, which, though false, were not improbable, aided my wickedness; and this time my lies had not the plea which I ordinarily put forward—that of being harmless.

I invented a story about Fanny, which, by attacking her honesty, could not fail to create very serious suspicions. I had the misfortune of making my tale so plausible, that my mistress, and even old Mary, were deceived, and the innocent girl was sent home to her parents. The latter, however, irritated at the fault of which she was accused, refused to receive her. It was reported at the mansion that some one had met her with a small basket on her arm walking sadly on the Leicester road. As my heart was not yet hardened, I was horror-struck on seeing the terrible consequences of my calumny; and my first impulse was to go to Mrs. Bancroft and avow the truth. I left my room with this intention; but, alas, I had to thread a long corridor, descend a grand staircase, and pass through a suite of rooms. All this took some minutes; they were sufficient to shake my resolution, the consequence of my odious falsehood presenting itself before me like a phantom. I saw in an instant the blame and humiliation which would overwhelm me, and I ran back and shut myself in my

room, where I passed two hours in the bitterest regret, struggling to stifle the reproaches of my conscience.

Some months passed, during which remorse deprived me of rest, whilst the fear that my wickedness might be discovered, kept me in a continual state of anxiety. If a stranger entered the courtyard, it seemed to me he came to denounce my deceit; if my mistress went to spend some time with her neighbours, I trembled lest she would come back informed of my conduct, and her return made me shudder. My life was miserable during this time. Had I possessed the courage to accuse myself, I should have quieted my remorse, and my confession would have disposed my mistress to be indulgent; but pride restrained me, and at last just as I was feeling assured, accident, or rather the justice of God brought to light the secret which made me so wretched.

I have already said that I had accused Fanny of dishonesty. Mrs. Bancroft had lost a purse containing some gold, and I had the effrontery to insinuate that Fanny had taken it. My imagination created little details, which made the circumstance appear plausible enough, and this last accusation confirming several others which I had faintly thrown out before, came like the

drop of water which overflows the glass already too full.

Eight months after this fatal incident, Mr. Bancroft returning one day from shooting, brought in a cambric pocket-handkerchief which he had found in a copse a little distance from the house. This handkerchief so long hidden in the bramble bushes, would not have attracted his attention, but that searching about with the end of his gun, amongst a mass of dead leaves for a partridge that had just dropped there, he caught it up, and to his great astonishment thought he heard, as he threw it back, something like money strike against the stones. He stooped down, examined the handkerchief closely, and found tied up in a corner a purse containing four sovereigns. He remembered what his wife had lost, and recollected that during the previous spring, on returning from a walk, she had sat down in that place at the foot of a tall oak, which stood at the entrance of the copse. There was no difficulty in supposing that her handkerchief had been forgotten, and that the circumstance of her having rested in the wood never entered her mind to account for the loss of her purse. Immediately on the return of Mr. Bancroft, my mistress sent for me; but in presence of this positive proof of the falsity of the narrative I had invented, my imagina-

tion ordinarily so quick and fertile, supplied me with no excuse. I remained dumb-founded, bewildered, and in so fearful a state of embarrassment, that, were I to live a hundred years, I should never forget that moment.

Mrs. Bancroft refused to keep me any longer ; out of compassion, however, she added five pounds to the wages which were due to me. She was, moreover, too just to give me a character ; she had, however, the kindness to recommend me to a dress-maker who employed several other girls. I might still have escaped from the abyss into which I had begun to fall ; but you will see by the sequel of my story how guilty one may become when listening only to the voice of the passions. It is already late, and you must leave me ; but if you can come to-morrow, I will continue my narrative, which the hope that it may be useful to you, could alone give me the strength to finish.



CHAPTER XII.

THE BITTER SIN.

"Thou shalt not steal."—EXODUS XX. 15.

RUTH and Rachel whose interest and curiosity were equally excited by the story of the unfortunáte Nancy, did not fail to go to her the next day, when after a few moments she resumed her narrative.

Mrs. Martin, she continued, into whose house I had been received through the recommendation of Mrs. Brancroft, was a widow of about fifty years of age. She was benevolent and kind, and treated her work-girls as though they were her children, allowing them all the harmless pleasures which became their age and condition. I might have led in this house a quiet and innocent life; but that the vices of which I have spoken do not come alone; lying and jealousy soon bring others. I will not detail to you all the circumstances which forced Mrs. Martin to expel me from her shop, notwithstanding the recommendation of Mrs. Ban-

croft. On leaving this situation, I sought one where I could be more at liberty to follow my own inclination. The next mistress who engaged me cared very little about the conduct of the girls she employed, and, provided they were industrious, was rather glad that they didn't go to church, because she could make them toil on Sunday mornings when she was pressed with work. She made no objection either to where we went in the evening, although it was to places very dangerous to persons in our position. I had a pretty face; my manners and my language, thanks to the education Mrs. Bancroft had given me, were somewhat polished; and my exterior was far from indicating the corruption which disfigured my soul. I was extremely flattered by the preference, which I obtained in general over my companions, so, instead of spending what I earned in useful things, all my ambition was to wear the prettiest dress and the sweetest bonnet; and when I had managed to obtain some finery, with which I thought myself decked out like a lady, my joy was complete.

Many months passed away thus. It is needless to tell you that I neglected all my religious duties. I never prayed; I never read the Word of God; I never approached the table of our Lord. One Sunday evening, however, I happened to enter a

church and heard so touching an appeal to those who had backslided, that I left the place almost resolved to lead a new life, and steadily frequent divine worship.

Unfortunately on returning home I met a young girl, whose society had been to me already hurtful on more than one occasion. She persuaded me by her entreaties and flatteries to accompany her to a house where several of her friends were assembled ; and this day, which should have been the epoch of my conversion, only plunged me further into that fatal career from which your charity has rescued me. A new proof that we may not reject, without vexing the Lord and meriting his displeasure, the good impulses He inspires.

For some time, that honesty which had once been so dear to me had received some severe checks ; and to obtain the finery which I admired, I did not hesitate to appropriate either a piece of stuff or a valuable strip of lace ; and until then I had managed to escape suspicion. Emboldened by impunity, I went at length to an excess which, some months before, would have made me shudder.

A young man, to whom I was engaged, having lost at cards a sum of money with which his master, a jeweller in the town, had entrusted him to purchase some trinkets, came to me hoping

that I could lend him the amount. But although I earned sufficient to put by something, the expenses of my dress always exceeded what I received, and I hadn't five shillings to offer him. In desperation at seeing himself lost, he suggested the fatal idea of my taking the sum he wanted from the till—my mistress often entrusting me with the keys—and assured me at the same time that he would faithfully repay me in a few days. Urged by his entreaties, I was wicked enough to obtain for him in this guilty manner the money which he said would save him from ruin. But he who could induce me to commit such an action had assuredly no idea of honesty, and never dreamed of dragging me from the embarrassment into which he had plunged me.

To describe to you what I suffered during that interval of three days, until the fatal money should be, as he had promised, returned, would be absolutely impossible. At last, time led to the discovery of my crime, and but for the kind warning of one of my companions I should have fallen into the hands of the police, to whom my mistress had denounced me.

Leaving the town with only five shillings in my pocket, and a small parcel which contained some linen, I walked for hours into the country,

not knowing whither I was going. At length overcome by fatigue, and a prey to the liveliest terrors, I listened a long time in the dull silence of the night for some distant sound to strike upon my ear. There was not a whisper. No. I seemed alone with nature. Alas, I was there alone with my wicked conscience. My strength had not altogether failed me, and I lay down in a wood a few yards from the road which it bordered. Notwithstanding my fears sleep came to my aid, and when I awoke it was broad daylight. I was oppressed with hunger; since the morning of the previous day I had eaten nothing. Resolved to enter the first village I should come to, I resumed my journey, and in about two hours perceived a church tower on the side of a hill about a mile and a half further on. On arriving at the village, I perceived from the extraordinary excitement and bustle there, that preparations were being made for a *fête*. The small merchants of toys, trinkets, gingerbread-nuts, earthenware, and drapery; had already arrived. The booths were erected in the High Street, to the great joy of the children and even of the older inhabitants. But what delighted them most was the arrival of a huge caravan containing a theatre, or, to speak more properly, the stage of a charlatan who came not only to cure all

kinds of maladies, but also to perform a thousand tricks by sleight of hand, to which he joined, unfortunately, others less innocent. The family of this man, who was named Tresscott, consisted of his mother, his wife and three children, a lad sixteen years of age, and two daughters younger by some years. Each had his *rôle*. The father sold drugs, and, as well as the son, did some juggling performances and legerdemain miracles. The little girls danced on the tight-rope, walked on their hands, and twisted their bodies in a hundred ways, which made one shudder. To the grandmother was entrusted the important and lucrative business of fortune-telling and abusing the simplicity and ignorance of the poor people, whose past histories or plans for the future some confederate had beforehand made her acquainted with.

The day was Monday—to the good country folks a day of great glee and amusement, which must be repeated for them on the morrow. All the village was so excited, and had been so highly entertained, and had seen so many wonderful things, that no one felt inclined to return to work. They would willingly have detained the favourite troupe, which had afforded them so much pleasure, a day or two longer. Tresscott, however, was not disposed to prolong his sojourn; for though he

might have preferred staying, it began to be whispered about that an article of dress, or a snuff-box, or something of the kind, was missing in a mysterious way. So, on Tuesday evening, before any one had entered his caravan, Tresscott prepared to depart. To my astonishment, he came and proposed to me that I should accompany him. His wife and daughters, he said, had scarcely time to work, his mother often required careful tending, and, if I would associate myself with them, they would give me a part of their profits. Alas ! I learnt when it was too late what he meant by profits. The proposal, however, then appeared to me too good to be rejected.

I was soon installed a member of the caravan. Tresscott told me, that instead of going to London, he intended to visit Devonshire and Cornwall first, which was satisfactory to me, for the greater number of miles that were put between myself and Rockton, the more my mind was relieved. Of course, my chief feeling was one of relief, on seeing that I was about to escape the punishment which threatened me. Once free, however, from the fear of falling into the hands of the police, I began to grieve at having lost in a moment all my finery. The parcel I carried could not contain, as you may imagine, half what I required. Not only all

those pretty dresses, of which I was so proud, but things of absolute necessity were lost to me, and this deprivation was doubtless a first punishment for the manner in which I had acquired most of the articles I now regretted.

To-morrow I will continue my sad adventures, but at present I have need of repose, for it is not without sore pain that one can review such a life as mine.





CHAPTER XIII.

A FAMILY OF VAGABONDS.

"A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth."—GEN. iv. 12.

WITH my new master (Nancy continued, the next evening), I visited many towns and villages. Promptly instructed in the art of cheating, I wonderfully aided Tresscott's old mother in her lying mission, and replaced her when she was too ill to attend to the fortune-telling department of the business. Further, as I was not wanting in cleverness, it happened more than once that I added to the common treasury several valuable articles obtained with sufficient dexterity to prevent suspicion falling upon our company.

I passed many years in this disgraceful kind of life, and, as you may imagine, it soon destroyed the few good feelings, or rather recollections, which had hitherto still remained to me. I plunged deeper every day into the deplorable path of crime,

and could not have believed myself capable of being henceforth moved with the desire to do a good action, had not a circumstance occurred to prove to me that God, whom I had so greatly offended, had not allowed every good sentiment to be irretrievably extinguished in his wretched creature.

The heartless Tresscott, who had neither pity nor remorse, contrived to steal a poor little girl, whom he destined to replace his daughters, now become too tall to execute many of the tight-rope contortions to which he had trained them. My pity for this unfortunate child made me form the project of restoring her to her home, in spite of the dangers which I might run in carrying out this difficult task. At the end of some months, during which I had alleviated as much as I could her sad lot, I was fortunate enough to be able to send her back to her parents, through the agency of a man on whom I could thoroughly depend. Tresscott never knew that it was through my instrumentality that the child had escaped.

Many years flowed on, and I still pursued the miserable kind of life which I have just described. At length old Dorothy, the mother of Tresscott, nearly eighty years of age, was compelled by her infirmities to renounce her odious part of pretended

sorceress, whilst the daughters were engaged to be married. The son, too, a clever trickster, could not endure this wandering life, and went to settle at Colton, in the Black Country, where he believed he should certainly make his fortune. So Tresscott, who had saved a good lot of money, gave up his wandering career, went to reside near his son, and proposed to me to remain with his mother, promising himself to provide for me.

I had saved a little sum, and as at this time I was only fifty, I thought that when the poor old mother died, I should be able still to work; so, naturally careless, I was perfectly easy as to the future. I did not reflect, moreover, on the manner in which I had acquired the little I possessed. I still hoped to enjoy it, and to be happy. But the justice of God pursues and reaches the guilty when they least expect it.

Scarcely two years had elapsed after we had abandoned our wandering life, when Tresscott, who had become addicted to gambling, lost nearly all the fruits of his plundering. Instead of endeavouring to repair by labour the losses which his foolishness had entailed, he only dreamt of engaging on a larger scale in the trade of his whole life, and connected himself with a band of professional thieves. At length the hour came, and he was

made to feel the rigours of human justice. He was convicted of an attempt at forgery, condemned, and separated for ever from his family. I have heard that he only survived a short time, and that his death was as impious as his life had been criminal.

The son of this wretched man left Colton almost immediately, not being able to endure the shame with which the conviction of his father had covered him, whilst the poor mother, on hearing the calamity which had befallen her son, became seriously ill. I nursed her as well as I could. After several nights passed by her bedside, and without leaving the room, I felt so much need of breathing a little fresh air, that one day I entrusted her for three or four hours to the care of a neighbour, and went out with the sole object of taking a walk. It was Sunday, but the thought of the duties which that day imposes had long since vanished from my mind. I saw a large number of persons entering a fine church, and mechanically joined the crowd. After the prayers, a venerable, silver-haired old gentleman entered the pulpit, and began to preach. His countenance, mild and noble, accompanied by a voice and words full of feeling, riveted my attention. With a beating heart and brain on fire, I listened for many minutes. He

preached against scandal, and painted with such force the misery of a soul which had in any way contributed to the loss of another, that at that moment the recollection of Fanny Palmer presented itself to my mind, and filled me with real terror. I saw, I heard God demanding of me an account of that soul, so innocent, so pure, at the time when my wickedness had driven her first to indigence, and then to crime, by taking from her friends.

I felt my face bathed with tears, and, fearing lest I should be observed, I left the church in a state of inconceivable anguish. What could I do? I was terror-stricken with remorse, and felt a momentary repentance, which, strange to say, took the form of wishing to contribute to the conversion of another soul by way of recompense for the loss of poor Fanny's. On my return to our humble lodgings, I resolved immediately to use all my influence to get the poor mother of Tresscott to send for a clergyman. If the worthy clergyman whom I had just heard knew that she was ill, he would have been, I felt sure, eager to come and offer her the consolations of religion; but he did not know it, and I did not know how to obtain an introduction to him. At length I confided my embarrassment to a neighbour, and she undertook

to tell the clergyman both of the illness and the moral state of the poor woman.

The next morning he came, and it was not without a sinking of the heart that I heard him tap gently at the door. I feared lest he should meet with a painful reception. In fact, when old Dorothy saw him, her face presented a strange mixture of anger and dread.

The worthy vicar approached her bed with a countenance full of kindness, but she only replied with a rude yes or no to the questions which he put to her respecting her suffering. "She knew well," she said bitterly, "what he came for, but that, never having entered a church for sixty years, and having heard it was useless, she was not going, in her state of weakness, to begin to busy herself about such things."

The clergyman replied with so much gentleness and sympathy to these discouraging words, that old Dorothy listened to him quietly. This poor creature had grown grey in the neglect of her duties; however, if indifference had replaced in her the good habits of childhood, at least she had not to combat the incredulity of reason, which would have flattered its pride at the same time that it proved its ignorance. The winning manner of the vicar softened and subdued her heart, and she

did not reject his proposal, when he said that he would come again to see her.

Dorothy's illness continued longer than was expected ; the scanty means which I had to support her, now that she could receive nothing from her son, were quickly exhausted. I sold what few valuables I had, and with the proceeds I managed to maintain the dying creature. The clergyman came often, and God blessed his efforts ; but the old woman was sadly distressed at the impossibility of restoring what she had illegitimately acquired. Her pastor, however, endeavoured to console her by assuring her that God, who had already punished her by depriving her, through the disgrace of her son, of all the profits of her frauds, would accept her present repentance and good intention.

The mother of Tresscott died shortly after, and I accompanied to her last resting-place the poor old creature whom I had so long and devotedly nursed. On entering the cemetery, however, my foot slipped upon the wet grass—it had rained overnight—I fell heavily, and could not rise. I had broken my leg. Judge of my despair, for I had scarcely a penny in the world. The clergyman who had witnessed my conduct towards Dorothy had me taken to the hospital, where I remained six weeks. At the end of this time I tried to get a

situation, but, as I had no character, who would accept my services? .

I wrapped up in a handkerchief what little I possessed, and left the town without knowing whither I should go: what mattered it to me where I should find myself in the evening? Had I a single friend in the world from whom I could ask pity or assistance? Slowly pursuing the high road, I inwardly compared my present position with what it might have been had not my ingratitude and wickedness forced my excellent mistress, years and years ago, to have nothing more to do with me, and to leave me to the sad fate from which she would willingly have preserved me.

I will not relate in detail all the suffering and humiliation I had to endure from that hour to this. Public charity had become my only resource.

I continued for several years the miserable trade of begging; but my infirmities increased with my age. Sometimes I was so weak and ill that I was obliged to remain for several days in the workhouse, but, not having any fixed domicile, I could not be received into them permanently, and had to fall back again for support on the charity of passers by.

One day, as I left the Union, I observed an extraordinary movement; a crowd was hastening towards a place where they appeared to expect

some kind of spectacle. I asked a couple of women, who were talking together near me, what was the matter. "Alas!" said one of them, "a man is about to be hanged for having murdered his master under very atrocious circumstances."

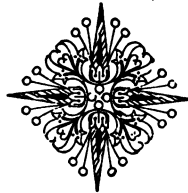
My blood was chilled in my veins, and, wishing to get away from this place of horror, I took a bye-road which led to another part of the town; but, scarcely had I entered that quarter, when I met some men who were calling out with a horrible indifference the details of the murder, a report of which they sold for a halfpenny.

I know not what fatal curiosity induced me to stop and listen. A shudder passed through me as I heard the name of the criminal. It was Thomas Fox. But there might be in that only an unfortunate identity of names. More dead than alive, I waited to hear the rest of his history. What a pang seized me on hearing that he had at first worked at Rockton at a jeweller's. I heard no more—my legs gave way beneath me. I sat on the step of an old uninhabited house, and, filled with horror, pity, and fright, it was several minutes before I could rise to fly from this fatal city. Soon, however, I heard a numerous crowd rushing by; I wished to avoid it, and turned down the first street that I came to, not knowing where I went.

The other end opened upon a large, gravelly space of ground occupied by the jail, and almost immediately above me rose the scaffold, on which I could distinctly see the features of the criminal. In spite of the great change which age had effected in him, I could still recognize that Thomas Fox who, many years before, had been the cause of my first crime and subsequent misery. I uttered a sharp cry and fled into a house, the door of which was open. I was so pale and trembling that a young woman, who saw that I was about to fall, came to me and gave me some water. Shortly after, the crowd dispersing, I knew that its cruel curiosity had been satisfied, and that there was nothing more to see.

The young woman, attributing the state in which I was to the shock of seeing an execution, wished me to take a little brandy to restore my strength. I thanked her, without accepting her offer, and, as soon as I could walk, left the town, and went to weep alone in the fields over the deplorable end of a wretch who, like me, had advanced from one sin to another, and who, at last, had drawn down upon himself, for the most horrible of crimes, the just vengeance of men. I do not recollect ever having been more miserable than during the six months which followed that terrible event, and

preceded the moment which has brought me to you, my kind friends. You know the rest, since it is through you that the divine goodness has softened my heart, and brought back a wandering sinner into the fold of Christ.





CHAPTER XIV.

THE END OF NANCY GOODALL'S HISTORY.

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee."—*Hymn.*

QN returning to Springfield, Ruth and Rachel talked only of the deeply-affecting narrative they had just heard. Reflections not a little profitable crowded on their minds. The unspeakable mercy of God towards Nancy touched them most, and strengthened their gratitude and love for the Divine Master whom they served. They also admired the chain of circumstances which had brought to Minster this poor creature, who was to find amongst them what she had in vain sought in so many other parishes—true and charitable friends, and a peaceful asylum.

Nancy's history was retold to Margery, and occupied nearly all the remaining evenings of the week. David and his mother appeared greatly interested in it; and even Dolly, in spite of her youth, listened eagerly, and derived useful and ineffaceable lessons from what she heard.

For several weeks a visit to the convalescent formed the chief object of the walks of the two friends. Not only did they find much edification in their conversations with Nancy, but they knew that their going greatly comforted the poor woman, who was confined to her bed by a weakness, which seemed to increase every day. The doctor began to despair of her recovery, and did not think that she could survive above a few months. His sad fears were soon realized, and sooner even than at first had been anticipated. A painful trial served to hasten the fatal moment. Although Nancy had sought refuge in God through Christ, and her trust in Him was equal to her repentance, yet, after having so long despised his commandments, and so persistently rejected his grace, she could not taste, immediately on her return to Him, that delicious calm, that serene happiness, which is the fortunate heritage of innocence alone. Thus her past life frequently started up before her, and filled her with a bitterness to which was added often serious terror. What excited her the most was the remembrance of the wretched Fanny Palmer, lost, perhaps, for ever, and lost by her fault. She seemed to hear from the bottom of the abyss that miserable girl reproach her with her crime, and curse her as the author of her unutterable woe. She seemed to see her rage, her

tears, her despair. Such were the terrible visions which pursued her in her dreams, and prevented her finding in sleep the repose which it generally brings, and which was so necessary for her. The worthy rector assisted her in repelling the temptations of distrust, and even despair, which the enemy of her salvation had cruelly raised in her soul. He made her feel the imminent danger of the net spread beneath her feet. Thanks to his zeal, she was enabled to avoid it, and learnt that to doubt the mercy of God is at once a great sin, and the greatest of misfortunes, since it renders repentance useless, and leads to final impenitence.

These moral shocks exhausted the remaining strength of the invalid, and hastened on the final moment, for which, however, she prepared herself with calmness, and even eagerness. When she perceived her last hour approaching, she expressed a desire to see Ruth once more. She wished to ask the powerful aid of her prayers, and said that the sight of this angel of innocence and peace, who was the first to induce her to seek for pardon at the foot of the Cross, revived hope in her heart, and filled her with sweet and pious sentiments. Ruth was informed of her wish, and, accompanied by Rachel, quickly followed the person who had been sent to fetch her.

When they entered the chamber of the dying woman, the last rays of the setting sun fell upon a scene both solemn and affecting. The glazed eye of the sufferer brightened up on perceiving Ruth, and, with an emaciated finger, she made a sign to her to approach the bed. These two Sisters of Mercy contemplated with profound pity the colourless face, the wrinkled and worn features, which expressed so much painful anxiety. Ruth especially was deeply touched, and, unable to master the impulse of her heart, grasped the hand of the sick woman, languidly stretched out from beneath the clothes. At the same time, she bent over her, and asked in a soft voice if she felt worse.

"I suffer terribly," said Nancy, casting her tearful eyes upon Ruth, "but not perhaps as you think. Oh, may you always preserve the innocence of your soul, and that peace which is its fruit, and which, whilst it is the greatest blessing of life, becomes doubly valuable at that last moment at which I am arrived. But, alas, how can I share its sweetness, when I have to reproach myself with the loss of a soul? O God! O God! have pity upon me, for this frightful thought overwhelms and terrifies me."

The poor creature then covered her face with her hands, and shed a torrent of tears. It was now

that the consoling angel whom she had called to her side, animated by a holy love, whispered to her words of comfort, well calculated to calm her fears. Great was the contrast between the two countenances thus brought closely together. The one shone with freshness, innocence, and saintly fervour; the other was pale, withered, and already darkened with the shadow of death. Nevertheless, it soon lost what was repulsive to the eye of nature. To the inexpressible joy of Ruth, a ray of serenity came, and changed the worn and weird expression. Ruth now felt that celestial peace had again returned to the soul of poor Nancy.

Nancy was praying silently, when a gentle tap was heard at the door, and the rector entered to administer the holy communion. Repentance, love, and heartfelt respect were depicted alternately on the face of the dying woman, with no mingling of any other feeling to mar the beauty of that heavenly repose. The solemn ceremony concluded, Dr. Blessington withdrew, and Ruth and Rachel remained, but spoke not, fearing to disturb the profound meditation in which the invalid seemed plunged. A considerable interval thus elapsed.

Suddenly, opening her eyes, Nancy asked Ruth and Rachel to come nearer. Her voice was so changed, that they became alarmed, and saw at

once that the poor woman was struggling in the last agonies of death. An icy perspiration bathed her forehead, her chest heaved heavily, her hands fought and trembled. The sufferings which her features and movements indicated would have touched the hearts of the most insensible. Ruth and Rachel burst into tears.

Perceiving this, Nancy observed solemnly, though in a faint voice and broken sentences—

“I have nothing to complain of; a frightful storm has burst over my head; but, in the midst of my distress, a helping hand was stretched out to me from Heaven. Yes”—and the glazed eyes shone an instant with the fire of gratitude—“the Rock of Ages had compassion on me. Trust replaced my fear, and a profound calm succeeded to the tempest. May all sinners put their hope in Him, and experience like me His blessing! And you, my young friend,” she continued, addressing Ruth, who gently pressed her cold hands, “listen—to the words—of a dying woman, to whom you have been as a guardian angel. A day will come when, stretched as I am now on a bed of sickness, a few moments only will separate you from eternity. Then, instead of the frightful vision of a soul lost by your sin, the sweet and comforting thought of having contributed to the salvation of a forlorn

sinner, who was about to perish for ever, will present itself to your remembrance, and you will bless the use which you have made of the days of your youth. Receive the blessing of a dying Christian. And—you—Rachel——.” Nancy would have addressed some words to the companion of Ruth ; but this effort was too much for her ; her voice died away for ever in those last words.

The Sunday following, Ruth and Rachel walked to the cemetery, and visited that part of it where the turf, recently removed, indicated the spot beneath which lay the mortal remains of Nancy Goodall in peace. They thought deeply, and not without saddest emotion, of that poor wanderer, whose course on the earth had been arrested in this place ; and, as they left this humble grave, they exalted the name of the Lord, and praised Him for all his mercies.





CHAPTER XV.

A DEDICATION.

"My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed ; I will sing and give praise."—Ps. lvii. 7.

BY this time the winter and its frosts had completely succeeded to the last fine days of the autumn. The trees, stripped of their leaves, displayed only bare branches covered with hoar frost. However, this veil of gloom, which seemed to envelop all nature, did not darken the interior of the farm at Springfield. Ruth and Rachel could no longer, it is true, cultivate to their heart's content the little flower-garden which David had given them, nor venture forth so often to breathe the pure air of the fields ; they had no longer the satisfaction of bringing every morning to Margery a basket of vegetables freshly gathered for their dinner and supper. There were no more affectionate surprises for their good mother, such as a pretty nosegay, still glittering with dewdrops, placed furtively on her bed just before she awoke, or a little basket filled with freshly-plucked straw-

berries, gathered with the hope of affording her an unexpected pleasure, and the exquisite perfume of which warned her on opening her eyes that she had been already thought of, and that hands had already been busy to please her. There were no more of these gratifications, it is true; but there were other occupations, and even other pleasures in store. In the afternoon when the house duties and those of the dairy were over, Ruth and Rachel would sit down to their work, of which there was always more than enough to keep them employed. Besides the work which industrious David and the troublesome Tommy gave them, this was the time of the year when the household linen was generally made up or mended. It was then, too, that the conversation of Margery, now cheerful, now serious, profited the young girls, who derived lessons from her long experience in the mysteries of cookery and other domestic arts. To all, and the good grandmother especially, constantly surrounded as she was by those who were so dear to her, the hours passed gently and pleasantly away. Sometimes their fresh and pure voices were blended together in a song or a hymn.

Then, Dolly would return from school. It was just at that intermediate hour, between day and night, when we can no longer work, and yet

the twilight is sufficiently bright to prevent our lighting a candle. This interval Ruth had reserved to complete the religious instruction of Dolly, who in a few months was about to perform the first important act of her life—that of being confirmed, and partaking of the holy sacrament. Ruth felt an ardent desire to make this young girl share in the rare and precious riches which she herself possessed. Retiring every evening to her room with Dolly, she devoted a considerable time to this excellent task ; so the Lord blessed her efforts, and crowned them with complete success.

There were amongst the children intended for confirmation many girls so completely ignorant, and who appeared so devoid of intelligence, that the worthy rector of Minster felt himself obliged to postpone for another year an act, for which, so far as they were concerned, their general conduct had not disqualified them. These poor children, deeply distressed at this decision, and encouraged by the accounts which Dolly gave of the extreme goodness of Ruth and her ability in teaching, came and begged her to instruct them ; and, thanks to the infinite pains which she took to enlighten their minds and to form their young hearts, they escaped the disappointment which threatened them.

But let us return to the Meredith family.

At eight o'clock in the evening they assembled for supper. David, delighted at having finished his day's labour, became then more cheerful and more talkative than at any other hour of the day. Immediately after supper, and whilst his father danced little Tommy on his knees, smothering him with kisses, the girls made haste to remove the things; the table carefully polished receives a new lustre; everything is in its ordinary place; a brilliant flame blazes on the hearth, around which every one presses, and they only await the arrival of three or four privileged persons who are admitted to spend the evening with Margery, to begin their stories and anecdotes; for, as we have said, it was considered a real privilege to be asked to David Meredith's, and, it is well known in all the country round, that it is not the first comer who may hope to enjoy it.

Then each pays his tribute by joining in the conversation and endeavouring to make it amusing. Ruth is never the last to put in her word, for this amiable girl, full of sprightliness and vivacity, feels a superabundance of happiness, which she owes in a measure to the delightful peace with which her heart is filled. Very different from those timid or austere religionists, who appear to take delight by the repellent severity of their manners in exciting a

disgust for piety, she created around her the holy desire to serve that God, who sheds so many inestimable blessings upon those faithful to Him. Her countenance displays not the fear of the slave who trembles lest he should irritate his master, but the sweet liberty of the children of God. She shows the same eagerness as Rachel to join in or even to invent some plan of innocent amusement. If anything occurs in this little circle to excite a burst of merriment, hers is so frank, her joyous laugh so natural, that every one around shares in it.

A day or so before Twelfth Night, David and his mother intimated that they should invite a few friends and neighbours on this occasion, and that there should be a drawing lots for King and Queen. Great joy did this announcement create at Springfield. You should have seen the activity which the young girls displayed in the preparations. Rachel cleaning everything, and giving to the furniture an extra polish; Ruth making *the* cake and attending to the cooking; whilst Dolly ran errands for everybody. Margery supervised quietly all the arrangements, a smile on her face, and seemed to enjoy the anticipated pleasure equally with the young people.

On the day of the party the delighted friends

busied themselves in giving the last touch to the arrangements for the evening. The table was laid out and supper served upon its bright board. Fowls and ham, roast beef and tongues, a magnificent home-made cheese and delicious cream, superb pears well preserved, almonds, and raisins, and filberts, and excellent honey, formed the principal elements of this festal meal, whilst in the centre sparkled the cake, made and frosted by Ruth herself. Nor must we forget some bottles of rare old elder wine, Margery's own vintage, placed by the side of David, with which, hot and sweet, his friends were to be regaled after supper. When the guests arrived, Margery's best room wore a gala aspect, for the good old mother and all the inmates of the farm were dressed in their finest, which added not a little to the brilliancy of the scene. Every one found there the pleasure which he had promised himself. A frank cheerfulness prevailed throughout the evening. It was one of those which the Lord far from disapproving, blesses and regards with the indulgence of a tender father, who follows with his eye the innocent pastimes of his children.

Chance, or, more properly speaking, a trick of David's, made the beaa fall to Ruth; and never did the queen of these joyous solemnities sustain

her part with a more pleasing dignity. All the company left at length, mutually satisfied with one another, and took away with them an agreeable recollection of the short moments which they had just passed together, for in it there had mingled nothing which they could look back upon with pain or remorse.

Spring, with her bright and sunny smile, had returned, when a letter arrived for Ruth. She was the more surprised at it, because she had recently received news from home, and her parents were not in the habit of writing very often. She felt a vague uneasiness on noticing that the address was not as usual in the handwriting of Aunt Jane. Her first impulse was always to have recourse to God, and at this moment she raised her heart to Him, praying that she might submit herself entirely to his will, whatever it might be. Her apprehensions were only too well founded. That excellent woman, to whom Ruth owed so much, who since her birth had been her guide and model, and had always shown her the tenderness of a mother, had just succumbed to a violent and sudden illness. Her constitution, worn out by long suffering, had been unable to resist a new shock. It proved the last, and removed her from the love and veneration of all who surrounded her.

Ruth's family was plunged into the deepest affliction ; it seemed to them that they were henceforth isolated upon the earth, and had lost with the good Aunt Jane all happiness and support. What shall we say of the grief of Ruth ? It was deep, and she felt all the bitterness which an affectionate and fond heart is capable of experiencing. Nevertheless, the certainty of the happiness of her whom she mourned, and a comparison between the life of suffering which she had just closed, and the infinite felicity which she now enjoyed, infused a soothing balm into the soul of the pious Ruth. She learnt afresh, that we may find in the forgetfulness of ourselves, and especially at the foot of the Cross, a courage and resignation unknown to those who, abandoned to their own weakness, allow themselves to be cast down under the weight of a grief too often deplorably selfish.

In spite, however, of her most prayerful efforts, it was some time before Ruth could recover that gentle cheerfulness which was her chief charm, and frequently, indeed, tears glistened on her eyelids ; but never did any of her occupations suffer for her sorrow. She made this, in fact, a new occasion for drawing nearer to God, who does not forbid us to feel, but who demands only an entire submission to his will.

By the time the first burst of grief had subsided, early Spring had passed, and May brought with her the solemnity so ardently desired by Dolly. Her exemplary conduct had gratified all her friends, and proved that she understood the importance of the act for which she had prepared herself. This loving child was attached to Ruth with all the warmth of her age, strengthened by the thought of the inestimable lessons she had derived from her. We have mentioned what Ruth had already done for some children, whose incapacity would have been for any one else a real discouragement. This excellent girl, however, stimulated by the hope of having the sentence of exclusion pronounced against them revoked, exerted herself so much the more as the difficulties in her path became greater. It was interesting to see her, at an age when generally thoughtless girls love excitement and amusement, devoting all her leisure moments to the arduous task which she had undertaken, repeating a hundred times the same explanation, presenting it in a hundred different forms, and always with the same unalterable patience and gentleness. Do not imagine that it was without effort that she had obtained this mastery over herself. Victory is never won, except by hard fighting and struggling. Were it not so, where would be

the merit or reward? In those moments of trial for her patience, Ruth had one thought present, which never failed to revive her courage. She remembered the love and gentleness which our Saviour always manifested towards children; she saw Him surrounded by these innocent creatures, and gathered from his sacred lips that merciful injunction, "Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not."

We may then easily understand the joy of our young heroine, when after a fresh examination the worthy rector of Minster declared the children, who had been the objects of her faithful care, qualified to be admitted to the same happiness as their companions. Their young hearts filled with gratitude—knew not how to express their feelings—and they, as well as their parents, overwhelmed Ruth with the warmest thanks.

The day so longed for at length arrived. Never had the sun shone more purely in the midst of a cloudless sky. At ten o'clock in the morning, Dolly, clad all in white, left home, after having asked and obtained the blessing of her parents. She was accompanied by her sister and Ruth. The ceremony was beautiful and touching; but we will not penetrate into the heart of Dolly, and reveal the sweet and sacred vows she made on thus

dedicating herself to the Lord. Suffice it to say, that her feelings were so deep and fervent, that the recollection of them will never be effaced. When she left the church with Ruth and Rachel, where they had enjoyed such unalloyed happiness, the three repeated together the beautiful hymn for the occasion, beginning—

“ Oh, happy day, that fixed my choice,
Through grace, on Thee, my Saviour God !
Well may my grateful heart rejoice,
And tell thy goodness all abroad !”

That evening Ruth and Rachel resolved upon making a friendly pilgrimage to the ruins of the chapel where they had first met. But this time they were not alone ; Dolly was with them. Placed between the two friends, she seemed to be the object of their tender regard and the centre of their thoughts. They looked alternately upon the beautiful prospect of nature, then in her freshest garb, and on the young child whose face beamed with a heavenly serenity and loveliness. Her open brow portrayed the sweet fervour which had all day filled her heart, and imprinted upon her features a kind of moral dignity. They felt on seeing her, an affection mingled with respect. Indeed, there is not a more agreeable spectacle in the eyes of men and angels, than that of a young soul bounding

with love towards that God, whom she has early learnt to recognize as the only source of good, and bringing to Him the homage of a heart still adorned with its primitive purity.

Arrived at the top of the hill, the three contemplated for some time the exquisite landscape, "looking through nature up to nature's God," and more. They conversed about that spiritual world which could never have been discovered by them, had it not been divinely revealed, and they entered into a solemn bond of Christian fellowship, promising through life to abide by, comfort, and assist each other in whatever trials might overtake them. On their return home, the evening quickly passed away in pleasant conversation with David and Margery;—and when they retired to rest, their sole regret was that this joyous day, the memory of which could never be destroyed, had so quickly ended.





CHAPTER XVI.

LILIAN LONGTON.

"Consider the lilies of the field."—MATT. vi. 28.



SHORT distance from David's farm, was situated Melrhyn Castle. From the windows of his humble homestead, the antique towers of this splendid mansion, and the stately avenue of elms which led up to it could be easily seen. Colonel Longton, the proprietor, had just arrived there with Lilian, his only daughter, an accomplished and graceful girl of nineteen. A widower for many years, he had concentrated all his affections upon this child, who alone remained to him. Wishing to procure for her all the advantages which a brilliant education could give, he removed to London, and surrounded his daughter with the cleverest and most renowned masters. At the same time he selected a governess capable of directing her talents—a difficult task indeed with one whose intelligence was so precocious and striking. Lilian, in fact, seized with half an ear what

her masters meant, and often astonished them by the promptness and justness of her replies ; so that what cost so much trouble and application to ordinary children, was but mere play to her. As she advanced towards womanhood, her faculties developed in the most brilliant manner, and when she had reached her eighteenth birthday, her father withdrew her from the hands of the governess, and introduced her into society under the auspices of one of her relations.

Not only was Lilian at this time remarkable for the extent and variety of her attainments, but she united to them all that could dazzle and charm, extraordinary beauty, a demeanour full of grace and nobleness, and a countenance in which tenderness and intelligence were visibly blended. She added to these advantages a heart full of sensibility, and a generous and elevated character. There was, however, one thing that she lacked, and unfortunately that was the most essential of all ; that which alone could strengthen in her heart the good qualities she possessed, and serve as a rampart against the temptations which were likely to beset her path. Her father profoundly indifferent to religion, had allowed his daughter to share this deadly lethargy. Conducted every Sunday to church by a governess without piety, she had learnt respecting religion

only so much as society will hardly let us ignore. As to the spirit and sentiments which ought to animate the Christian, she had no idea whatever. She was a stranger to those amiable virtues which the pious soul alone enjoys, and the source of which is as pure as it is holy. That humility which fears praise and will fly from it; that patience which bears without complaint troubles and disappointments; that love of God which elevates and ennobles the simplest duties—all this was unknown to Lilian, otherwise excellently well instructed in many vain, or at least useless things. Her natural goodness had not proved sufficiently powerful to shield her against the common impulses of pride and irritation. These, indeed, did not form the basis of her character, but they often disfigured her soul, and governed without any check. However, the Lord had compassion upon her, and did not permit her to be exposed defencelessly to the dangers which from all sides were about to threaten her weakness.

The season for enjoying the country was approaching, and Colonel Longton, proud of his daughter, prepared with secret joy to present her to that world, in which she was so well formed to shine and be admired. He rejoiced beforehand in her success, for idolizing his child, he had not one

thought, one sentiment—he did not form one plan—of which she was not the aim and object. In a word, he lived only for her, and if he had not endeavoured to enrich her with spiritual treasures, the only precious ones in the eyes of a Christian, it was, that he himself was ignorant of their inestimable value.

Colonel Longton had determined to give a magnificent ball, to which all the young friends of Lilian were to be invited, and at which she herself was to appear, for the first time under her father's roof, as the queen of the *fête*, and in all the splendour of a charming toilet. Grand preparations had already commenced in every direction; a host of work-people filled the house, and laboured incessantly on the brilliant decorations of the different rooms. Lilian had a strong inclination for luxury and elegance, but her mind was of too elevated an order to attach, like many young persons, an excessive importance to the adornment of her own person. She was not, however, indifferent to that which might give to her father's house the stamp of splendour. She was indefatigable in directing the work-people, delighted at the idea of the pleasure which this charming *fête* promised her, whilst her heart especially gladdened with gratitude for the multiplied proofs which she received of the affection of her father. As she was endowed with a lively and

delicate sensibility, no kind act of his ever passed unnoticed, and she repaid with usurious interest the love which he lavished upon her.

Lilian had not yet fully tasted the golden cup of worldly pleasure ; she was now putting it to her lips, when a merciful hand dashed the impoisoned chalice away in a manner as sudden as unforeseen. The evening before the day fixed for the ball, on her return from a rather prolonged walk, Lilian, not accustomed to this kind of exercise, felt greatly fatigued. Some hours later, she was attacked with a shivering fit, and a general feeling of indisposition. The doctor, sent for in haste, saw in these symptoms nothing more than a cold, which a little care would dissipate. Lilian recollected, indeed, that, on entering the house, she had stopped to give a last look at the decorations, which were just being finished, and that she experienced a slight sensation of chilliness whilst standing about.

The doctor's predictions were not realized. When he returned in the morning, a burning fever, a sharp pain in the side, and a nasty cough, told him that the illness which he at first thought so trivial, was nothing less than an inflammation of the chest, which developed itself with alarming gravity.

I pass rapidly over the change of scene which

took place in the house, over the father's anxious fears, the physical sufferings and the moral anguish of this young girl, whom death threatened, and already seemed to grasp in his icy hand. Oh, that some consoling thought had come to mitigate the horror with which dissolution always inspires our nature ! But, alas, Lilian had none which could fortify her soul, and conduct it safely to the gates of eternity, which already opened before her. The little she had learnt of religion, and the secret mutterings of her conscience told her inwardly that her life, in which God had had no part, could not be innocent in his eyes ! She now perceived and understood truths which, until then, had scarcely glanced across her mind ; her heart became penetrated with them, and she murmured a prayer for strength and consolation, which her affectionate mother had taught her in her childhood.

For several days the illness continued to increase, and left at last no hope of recovery. A final effort of science, however, was crowned with success. Lilian rallied ; and God, in his mercy, gave back to the disconsolate father that life which had been so seriously menaced, and which was more precious to him than his own.

Months, however, passed away, and yet her health was not re-established. Far from it, a debility which was attributed at first to a temporary exhaustion of nature supervened, and seemed to waste away her strength. A dry and constant cough resisted every remedy, and, by fatiguing the patient, added to her languor, and thus renewed the alarm, so keen and anxious, of Colonel Longton. The moral state of Lilian was not less sad to observe. Her natural energy, after having struggled bravely against her sufferings, had been insensibly undermined by their force and duration. To the regret she felt at seeing the pleasures she had just begun to taste vanish away, was added the impossibility of pursuing long any occupation—even the cultivation of her talents. She saw herself doomed, in spite of herself, and for an indefinite time, to an idleness which was a real punishment to her active and ardent mind. Thus the days rolled on, in a dejection and melancholy which she no longer struggled against. Oh, gentle pity, how true is it that thou art useful in every emergency ! Useful in temptation, to aid us in overcoming it ; useful in our joys, to restrain them within just bounds ; useful especially in the trials of our sad pilgrimage, to smooth their roughnesses and assuage their pains ! One breath of thine would have revived

this young plant fast withering, and give it a new sap and a new vigour !

Spring, with her gentle charms, had succeeded to the rough winter, without bringing any improvement in the health of Lilian. Her father, in despair, determined to make a last effort to ward off the terrible blow which threatened him. Again, he had a consultation of the most eminent physicians in London, and entreated them to direct all their attention, all their skill, to the examination of his daughter's state. The result of the conference was a recommendation of change of air and scene. This, it was deemed, was the first thing to be done, if the Colonel would save his daughter from degenerating into a confirmed and hopeless invalid. Fresh air and fresh scenery, said the doctors, joined to a mild *régime*, would produce a sensible improvement. If these means did not succeed, they would have, as a last resource, to seek a complete change of climate, and the soft temperature of Nice or Mentone.

From this moment the Colonel had but one thought—that was to hasten his departure from London ; and it was not without some difficulty that he induced his daughter to share the idea. Lilian, formerly so amiable, so eager to gratify the best desire of her father, was no longer the same.

He perceived with silent grief, that the illness had not only affected her physical strength, but had wrought a sad change in her character. A deadly apathy had replaced the marks of affection of which he had lately been the fond object, whilst sharp and even severe words were spoken to the excellent Bridget, her nurse, who had tended her from infancy, who loved her as though she were her own child, and who, worn out with her own sorrow, shared deeply the anxiety of her master. This faithful servant had frequently had to leave the room sad and unhappy, because her attentions were badly received by her young mistress, hitherto so good and affectionate.

At length the order was received at Melrhyn to make ready for the family. By the kind solitude of Colonel Longton, the finest and most agreeable rooms of the mansion, those formerly occupied by his wife, were arranged for Lilian. The windows opened upon a delightful garden, from which escaped the sweetest perfumes of the lilac, the violet, the honeysuckle, and many other spring flowers. The Colonel had had conveyed thither, unknown to his daughter, a hundred little objects which he thought would please her, and had metamorphosed into a library a little cabinet attached to her room, which was formed by one of

the turrets of the castle. Here, too, were arranged a complete collection of Lilian's favourite authors, and the Colonel anticipated with a fond heart the pleasure which these different surprises would give his daughter. He reflected, nevertheless, with pain on the fact, that it would be some time at least before she could enjoy these literary treasures, since she was still too weak to devote herself to any occupation. Old Bridget could not in this respect be of much service; but the Colonel conceived a plan, which he proposed to carry out on his arrival at Melrhyn.

On leaving London it had been his intention to invite to the Castle some of Lilian's young friends; but this idea she had strongly opposed, and her father would not press a scheme, the utility of which she alone could appreciate; his only object being to provide her with suitable amusement.

It was on the 16th of May that the carriage containing Colonel Longton and his beloved daughter drove up the fine avenue of ancient elms, and stopped at the Castle. The news quickly spread through the country, and David had been thinking of going up and presenting his respects to the Squire, when he received a message requesting his immediate attendance at the mansion. He set out

without delay, glad to see once more a family to whom he had been for years attached, and wondering what could be the motive which had induced the Colonel to send for him.





CHAPTER XVII.

RUTH'S CHANGE OF POSITION.

"The peace of God which passeth all understanding."—PHIL.
iv. 7.

IN spite of all the precautions which had been taken to render the journey as little painful as possible to the young and lovely invalid, Lilian found herself extremely fatigued on arriving at Castle Melrhyn. She expected to occupy the room which had formerly been hers, and great was her surprise on being introduced into the grand suite into which no person had penetrated for a long time. It was there that the first years of her life had been passed with her mother. Every step consequently recalled to her a scene of that happy time, the souvenirs of which, always full of a melancholy charm, possessed a solemn interest when she remembered the beloved parent who had gone never to return. Leaning upon the arm of her father, whose pale features betrayed his emotion, she

contemplated with a tender and grateful heart the new and numberless proofs of affection which surrounded her. The eyes of the Colonel, filled with tears, met those of Lilian, who felt at this moment that a sweet and sacred task had devolved upon her. She understood that on replacing in those chambers one, whose loss had blighted the happiness of a husband, she ought to neglect nothing that might afford him, who had suffered so much, the consolation which, as a father, he could still enjoy. Her affection so subdued her, that when Colonel Longton pointed out to her shortly after, as if to consult her taste, different objects selected for her gratification, she could not find words to reply, and, bursting into tears, threw herself into his arms. This dumb language, more eloquent than words, filled the heart of her father with a thousand conflicting feelings. He perceived, that if her illness had somewhat modified the once gentle manners of his daughter, she had lost nothing of her profound affection for him. How he enjoyed the exquisite happiness of being a father, whilst pressing to his heart this dear child! But a sharp pang pierced him, as he observed afresh the change which long suffering had left on Lilian's beautiful face, and which the emotion of the moment and the fatigue of the journey rendered only too perceptible.

A terrible presentiment seized him. He fancied that that fatal room was to become a second time the scene of a similar calamity to that of which he could not think without shuddering. He rang the bell hastily, led his daughter to a couch, and entreated her to retire to bed, in order to repair by a rest so necessary for her, her exhausted strength. Having left her in the hands of Bridget, he descended into the garden, in the hope that the pure and fresh air of the evening would calm his extreme agitation. An hour afterwards, he sent for David ; and the latter, who, as we have seen, did not delay in obeying the summons, found the Colonel pacing rapidly up and down the avenue of lime-trees near the Castle.

It was nearly nine o'clock when David returned to the farm. No one had supped, for Margery determined to wait for her son before sitting down to table. During the meal he was, contrary to his usual habit, sad and thoughtful. Every one imitated his silence, and only interrogated him by their eyes. Margery was the first to speak, inquiring after the health of the new arrivals. It was then that the sorrow of David burst forth. It was unfeigned, for it originated in the deep attachment which he and his had always had for the family of the Squire—an attachment which was in some sort hereditary in

that of the good yeoman. His devotion had remained intact at a time when this kind of virtue threatens to become, if not altogether extinct, at least very rare. The deep affliction of Colonel Longton at the period of his wife's death had found an echo in the hearts of the honest people of the farm ; and since that time, not a single day had passed without their prayers being raised to Heaven for the preservation of the only fruit of so affectionate but too short an union.

David replied to his mother's questions by a detailed account of the alarming state of Miss Longton's health, and the anxiety which was rapidly injuring the Colonel's. He then told them that the Colonel had sent for him, to ask him to look out for a gentle, intelligent, and attentive young person, who might wait upon his daughter, accompany her in her short walks, and read to her. Then, turning towards Ruth, David said, without further hesitation, " It was of you I thought at once, my child ; you are the only person about here qualified to meet Colonel Longton's views ; and though it would cost me much to lose you, it shall never be said that David drew back when there was a possibility of rendering a service to his good friend. However, you are entirely free to act under the circumstance as you think best, for I

have no right to constrain your will ; so I would not say anything to the Colonel before I had spoken to you, in order to leave you as much as possible mistress of your own inclinations. I will not conceal from you, however, that it will be more comfortable and advantageous for you to be admitted into the Castle, than to remain with us. Think over it, then, and to-morrow you can give me your answer. I am going now to spend half an hour with neighbour Martin, for I want a little diversion : like many others, when I desire and dread the same thing, I am not always myself."

Saying these words, he took up his hat, and, without waiting for a reply, went out.

Ruth was sensibly touched at the proofs of regard which she had received on so many occasions from that honest man, apparently so stern, and at times even harsh. As to the proposal which he had just made, her regret at leaving her dear protectors would have been sufficient to prevent her accepting it, had not a natural timidity raised up a powerful obstacle. As anxious to withdraw herself from the observation of others, as some girls are eager to draw it upon themselves, she, a poor country girl, simple and ignorant of life, could not, without a feeling of dread, conceive the idea of being introduced to a young lady, accomplished in

the eyes of the world, lavishly endowed with the gifts of birth and fortune, and accustomed to find in the humblest of her servants a tone and manner unknown to Ruth.

Rachel, who was sitting by her side, kissed her lovingly, and asked her, with a rueful face, not to desert them, for she did not share in the same degree the devotion of her parents for the family at the Castle. Margery mildly censured her for attempting to turn Ruth from a project which her father seemed to have at heart. She had, however, not the courage to second his proposal, for Ruth was everything in that home—the consolation of one, the adviser of another, the joy of all.

Ruth, too modest to exaggerate her own merits, could not understand in what way she could, as David had said, fulfil the views of Colonel Longton; so, under the influence of her natural timidity, and following the inclination of her heart, she was about to declare her resolution not to leave the farm, when Bridget, who was an old friend of Margery's, entered the house.

After giving a long account of the illness and present state of poor Lilian, she exclaimed, "Whether God be pleased to take her from us, or allows her to suffer still longer, may He give her those principles which sustained the courage of

her excellent mother ! Poor dear child ! what will become of her without that ?”

Struck by these words, Ruth inquired with a modest anxiety respecting her religious sentiments.

“Alas !” replied Bridget, “they have taught her all except to know and love God.”

This was for Ruth a ray which enlightened her mind and dissipated her doubts. She fancied she heard Aunt Jane speaking again those words, which she had repeated so often to her, “My child, never allow an opportunity to escape of labouring for the salvation of a neighbour ; for blessed—a thousand times blessed—is he who contributes to the eternal happiness of a single soul ; he may with confidence hope for the salvation of his own.” An inward voice also spoke, reminding her that the conversion of the world had been the work of twelve men in a humble position, and that the Lord has often been pleased to manifest his power by using his feeblest instruments.

From that moment her mind was made up, and all her reluctance yielded to what she deemed to be her paramount duty. When she retired to rest, David had been informed of her determination, and shared with his family the keen regrets caused by the approaching departure of Ruth. Margery had easily fathomed the motives of her resolution,

and these but increased the esteem and affection she felt for the daughter of her adoption.

The next morning, conducted by David, Ruth was introduced into the vast hall of the Castle, and presented to Colonel Longton. On seeing her humble manner and timid look, the Colonel could little have dreamt that through her, and by her, happiness and salvation would enter his house. Nevertheless, like all those who saw her for the first time, he remarked with interest her saint-like face, and doubted not that she would fulfil better than he dared to hope the object which he proposed to himself in placing her near his daughter. What David said to him only served to confirm this consolatory hope, and he thanked the honest farmer with a heartfelt expression of gratitude for the sacrifice which his family made on his account.

We shall not follow Ruth during the first days of her sojourn at the Castle. We shall describe neither her *naïve* surprise at the sight of so many objects new to her, nor her sincere regret at leaving the good folks at the farm, nor the isolation and sadness she experienced, thus transplanted into a circle of individuals and occupations which were strange to her. We shall not dwell upon the favourable impression which she produced at once upon Lilian, nor on the pleasure which the

latter derived from her attentions. We are going to let four months pass, in order to avoid those minute details which would wearily retard our narrative. By this time Ruth was no longer tied to her young mistress only by the charitable motives which had induced her to go to her. A real attachment had sprung up between them, and in this she found a great compensation for her past sacrifices. As to Lillian, a single glance sufficed to show what a complete revolution had been effected in her. She was still, it is true, weak, and even at times a sufferer; but on her countenance, which so recently wore an aspect of disappointment and dejection, were impressed a calm resignation, a sweet serenity; and her complexion, still colourless, became animated with a brilliant warmth when she conversed about eternal truths or sung the praises of God.

Whence came so marvellous a change? We can easily imagine the reply, if we remember the reason which induced Ruth to leave the farm, and what had been, since her arrival at the Castle, the constant objects of her thoughts, her prayers, and her actions. How often did she not now recollect the observation of Aunt Jane, that the exclusive attention of the children of the world to their temporal interests, their prudence, their activity—in a

word, that ardour which nothing can abate or relax, ought to serve as a standard to Christians in all that concerns the glory of God and the salvation of their fellow-creatures. Raising her heart frequently to her Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, she prayed that He would not permit a culpable and shameful negligence to defeat the accomplishment of the work which He appeared to have entrusted to her. "Thou knowest," she cried, "that I have relied neither on my own efforts nor on my feeble lights; all my trust has been and will be in Thee alone. Put, then, into my mouth, O God, the words suitable to touch and enlighten a soul so well formed to love Thee; not for myself alone have I been taught to know Thee; so, in spite of my lowliness, aid me to sow in the hearts of others that seed which Thou hast mercifully fructified in mine!"

Sentiments so humble and so full of charity could not fail to bring down the blessing of God upon her who uttered them, and on her pious enterprise. But what a difficult task she had to perform towards a young lady whose superior intelligence, varied accomplishments, and extensive knowledge excited at every moment the astonishment and admiration of Ruth. She found herself by the side of Lilian so ignorant, so incapable, so utterly

worthless it seemed, that a thousand times she would have renounced her project had she not felt her courage revived by the thought that all knowledge is but vanity, but nothing, without that salvation, the chief knowledge which, fortunately for her happiness, had been taught her. She often said to herself, moreover, that he who had the Most High for an auxiliary, need not fear being vanquished. She understood, nevertheless, that she must act with extreme prudence, and study well the tastes and character of her mistress before venturing a single step. She remembered what Aunt Jane had often said about the necessity of circumspection, and endowed by a natural tact very rarely to be met with, she supplied with remarkable sagacity, the precious instructions she had received in her youth.

During her early sojourn at the Castle, Ruth confined herself to observing Miss Longton closely, sympathizing with her suffering, and especially her dejection, and praying the Lord to reveal Himself to her soul, which He alone could comfort. She scarcely doubted that her presence and example would prove more efficacious in disposing the heart of the young invalid to receive the good grain of the divine Word than the most eloquent sermons. On her side Lilian also closely observed her new attendant, and was not slow in discovering that a

motive more powerful than that of self-interest or natural kindness actuated her conduct. In fact, her constant and zealous application to her duties, her unchangeable sweetness, modesty, and equability of temper—in a word, a certain perfume of virtue, if we may use the expression, which spread over her open and serene countenance—all pointed to elsewhere than our earth for the source and sustenance of so many and such rare qualities.

Although a stranger to real piety and its secret practices, Miss Longton knew that it was to many persons their sole study and delight, and more than once had she envied their peace and happiness without being able to appreciate the cause. She did not doubt that Ruth drew from a sacred source those virtues which rendered her so amiable. Hence, there arose almost unconsciously in the heart of Lilian an increasing admiration and profound respect for a religion which produced so many good qualities. At length she resolved to devise some means to gain the confidence of Ruth upon a subject which powerfully excited her interest and curiosity. More than once, however, when she was about to question her, a secret shame held her back, for she vaguely felt how culpable must be the indifference in which she had hitherto lived respecting her eternal destiny. She feared

both the astonishment of Ruth, and the blame - which might seem to attach to this sad discovery ; but Divine Providence, who watched over her, presented a favourable opportunity, and she determined to seize it, whatever might be the result.

Lilian had been subject, since her illness, to frequent attacks of sleeplessness, which fatigued her extremely, and militated against the restoration of her strength. After an exceedingly restless night, she fell asleep towards morning, and her sleep continued still when Ruth, according to the orders which she had received the previous evening, entered the room at the usual hour. After she had cautiously and noiselessly drawn up the blind, she perceived that her patient was still asleep. She therefore resolved to profit by the interval before her waking by reading quietly a portion of Scripture, a treat which her numerous occupations not unfrequently deprived her of for days together. When she had read a chapter she closed the book and fell into a profound meditation on the beautiful passages it contained. Her eyes were shut, and her serene and saint-like face upturned to Heaven, as if in the act of silent adoration. At times her lips moved as with a murmur of prayer, and Lilian, who had been awake some few moments, and was profoundly touched at the spectacle before her,

fancied she heard her name uttered, and kept herself from making the least movement, lest Ruth should be roused from her devotional attitude. Lilian, however, seeing tears roll down the cheeks of Ruth, could not suppress a sigh; it was heard by Ruth, and put an end to her profound meditation. She raised her eyes to her mistress, and saw with astonishment that she was looking steadily at her.

Miss Longton asked her, in a tone full of gentleness, and with a friendly smile, what it was that made her tears flow, and appeared to fear that she might be unhappy at the Castle.

"Quite the contrary," quickly replied Ruth; "but you know we often suffer more for those we love than for ourselves, and it is heartrending to witness afflictions unconsolated, especially," she added meekly, "especially when we know where the consolation can be surely found."

"And what should prevent our having this precious gift, when we know where to find it?" asked Lilian, in a tone half serious, half jesting.

Ruth saw that she was understood. Encouraged by the kindly glance of the invalid, she advanced to the head of the bed, and presenting to Lilian the book she held in her hand said: "Here is a treasure, which contains consolation for all suffering, hope for all misfortunes."

Lilian, casting her eyes over the verses to which Ruth pointed, read these words : "Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." They seemed addressed directly to her, and Miss Longton closed the book visibly moved.

"Oh, my dear mistress," cried Ruth with warmth, "pardon me on account of the attachment which guides and emboldens me ; but I entreat you, do not close your heart to Him who speaks to you at this moment. Oh, if you could know his ineffable goodness, his infinite perfections, your heart would expand towards Him with rapture, and never cease to bless the moment He deigned to manifest Himself to you. Believe me, although I am but a poor girl, who often blushes when by your side at her ignorance, believe me when I assure you that those who have taught you all except the knowledge of salvation, have left you ignorant of the only truth capable of satisfying a mind and heart like yours."

The tone of conviction with which Ruth uttered those words, the burning zeal which animated her face, astonished Lilian, who had, until then, seen her so modest and reserved. A thousand thoughts crowded into her mind, but observing the deep anxiety with which her reply was expected, she

said, "Ruth, you give me a real desire to know better than I have hitherto done, a religion that inspires sentiments which I have often admired in you. But before going further, tell me how you came yourself by the deep knowledge you appear to possess on this important subject? What are your parents? Where do they reside? Where have you been taught? Tell me the history of your life."

We may well imagine that Ruth required no pressure, for this furnished a very natural opportunity of speaking of Aunt Jane—a happiness which she never neglected; and more, she perceived that it would be easy to introduce into her narrative some of the instructions and sage advice of that venerable friend. Her story interested Lilian deeply, and increased her esteem and attachment for Ruth. On the other hand, the ice once broken on a subject so near her heart, Ruth no longer hesitated to propose sometimes to read a pious and instructive book to her mistress, and to quote passages from Scripture, which she did with remarkable discernment, apposite to the times and the circumstances. Sometimes she expressed herself with a force and warmth which rendered her words really eloquent. Lilian, struck by the truths, altogether new to her, which this simple young girl uttered, and touched

by her affectionate zeal, soon felt her indifference shaken. Hitherto, she had been more ignorant than guilty, for no one had endeavoured to dissipate the darkness which enveloped her heart ; but now that excuse no longer existed. Light had shone for her, grace had spoken to her soul. Lilian understood that she had reached an important and decisive epoch in her existence, and with the straightforwardness and firmness natural to her character, she resolved without further delay to explore with so gentle and sure a guide, the new path along which she desired to walk. Ruth then was agreeably surprised on receiving one morning from her young mistress the order to go and ask Dr. Blessington to come to the Castle. Her heart beat with joy, for she drew the most favourable auguries from the message. Her presentiments were not deceived. From that day, Lilian pursued by the aid of the rector, who was as well read as he was zealous, a course of study very extensive, and brought to it an interest and perseverance worthy of her great talents. God blessed her efforts, and whilst opening her eyes to the nature and importance of her duties towards Him, He deigned also to put into her heart a firm determination to practise those duties with faithfulness.

Two months after the first visit of Dr. Blessing-

ton, Lilian reconciled to God, tasted with calm delight that peace which passeth all understanding. She could not comprehend the sad apathy in which she had hitherto lived with regard to her Redeemer and eternal destinies. Life appeared to her in a new light. Everything seemed ennobled and sanctified by Faith.

It would be difficult to describe the attachment which Lilian now entertained for Ruth ; she felt that she owed to her the most precious of gifts, and that her presence had become indispensable to her happiness. On her side, Ruth entirely devoted to her young mistress, could not cease to admire the happy change effected in her, and to offer up to Heaven sincere and constant thanks.

Since her residence in the country, Lilian's health had not exhibited those symptoms which had alarmed the doctors. Still her nervous system, shaken at first by a long illness and the languor which ensued, was seriously affected. It is well known, that nothing influences our moral character more than this kind of suffering which often produces either irritation or depression, and leaves the invalid without strength to overcome the variations of humour. At first, Lilian, deprived of the sole resource by means of which she could struggle victoriously against *ennui*, had passed from a state

of great irritability into one of excessive dejection, out of which nothing could rouse her. Neither the entreaties of her father, who urged her to seek some distraction in the occupations she formerly loved, nor the warnings of the doctors, who predicted, that by yielding to these impressions she would pave the way to consumption, could move her. Everything was in vain, and the days as they succeeded each other, only found her plunged in the same lethargy.

It was only now, since the grace of God had spoken to her heart, that life truly revived within her. Her father could not understand the change, which had been effected so rapidly in his dear child. He contemplated with delight her beautiful features on which health seemed to breathe again. The serious studies, which she had at first undertaken with effort, had become an occupation, full of interest, and the hours which she devoted to them were the most agreeable of the day. Thus weariness and melancholy had disappeared, and the Lord rewarded her efforts to know and approach Him, not only by the most precious spiritual gifts, but also by a visible return to health.

There still remained, however, a debility which the doctors wished to combat by moderate exercise, and they recommended short and frequent walks.

This was essential. From day to day, Lilian's strength returned; and at the end of some weeks she was restored to health. Colonel Longton scarcely dared to believe in his happiness. This beloved daughter restored to life was more amiable than ever, and seemed desirous of making up for the past suffering she had caused him by daily marks of the most winning affection. Happiness, by opening the heart to gratitude, disposes it also to draw near to God; therefore, we shall not be astonished to learn, that within a year of Lilian's recovery, her father himself was converted to the gospel of Christ, which he had neglected from his youth. Doubtless, the influence of his daughter, and her zealous efforts to win him over to a religion which afforded the only hope of salvation, contributed to that happy result. But what was the original cause of this blessing? The humble Ruth, who, faithful to the instructions of her pious Aunt Jane, had never recoiled before any difficulty, in her endeavours to bring back a stray sheep to the fold of the Redeemer. If many of those who profess themselves Christians would thus seize all opportunities to promote the glory of God and save their fellow-creatures, how many now lost would be reigning in Heaven!



CHAPTER XVIII.

UNEXPECTED RECOMPENSE.

"The Lord shall reward me after my righteous dealing; according to the cleanness of my hands shall He recompense me."—
Ps. xviii. 20.

RUTH had frequently visited the farm since the improvement in Miss Longton's health had given her more liberty. She was, of course, always received with open arms, and failed not to read in the eyes of her friends the desire to see her again settled amongst them. Rachel, on the other hand, did not attempt to disguise her feelings; she often declared, that her attendance being no longer necessary at Melrhyn, she ought to return. This, indeed, was the earnest wish of Ruth, in spite of her strong devotion to her young mistress. She not only considered Margery and David her benefactors, but she was fondly attached to Rachel by similarity of age, position, and sentiments, and enjoyed in her society the pleasure of a pure confidence and friendship,

which, to be perfect, presupposes a sort of equality between those who share it. The attachment which she had for Lilian, though deep and sincere, was of a different kind altogether, and mingled too much with respect and admiration to afford the same sweet satisfaction.

Seeing that David began to take seriously to heart her prolonged absence, Ruth resolved to speak to Miss Longton about returning amongst those who had, as it were, only lent her to her father. Her modesty prevented her seeing the value which they placed upon her services at the Castle, so she knew not how exceedingly necessary she had become to her young mistress. In fact, the latter appeared so grieved when Ruth asked permission to go back to the farm, that, surprised no less than touched at this new mark of confidence and interest, she knew not what she ought to do, since in either way she would be compelled to pain those who were anxious to lavish their affection upon her.

Lilian passed the afternoon of this day in a state of mind which she had not experienced since her recovery. Suddenly, as if struck by a bright idea, she raised her hand lightly to her forehead, rose with visible emotion, and disappeared. Ruth, occupied in arranging in her young

mistress's apartment, some dresses, remained astonished at this brusque action, and then retired to await with a feeling of anxiety the *dénouement* of this singular incident.

An hour afterwards, Ruth received a message to the effect that Miss Longton wished to see her. Not without a vague uneasiness she obeyed the summons. Lilian appeared to be impatiently waiting for her.

"Listen, Ruth," she said, eagerly, on Ruth's entering : "you saw this morning my distress when you spoke of leaving me ; it must have shown you how much I am attached to you ; yes, I am not ashamed to own how much I owe my present happiness to you. I have reflected much on the way by which I could secure your services, and at the same time enable you to carry out your grateful wish with respect to your friends at the farm. Heaven has inspired me with an idea which I hope will reconcile everything. I had, however, to obtain the approbation of my father before I could put it into execution, and I have it. This is it :—

"Your family at home are distressed, you say, at your long absence, and you regret it also. They are, you tell me, reduced to indigence in consequence of the wretched state of your poor father's health. Now then, Ruth, consider all these troubles at an

end for the future. My father has, at my request, given them the place of lodge-keeper, which has now been vacant some time; they will be well-paid and cared for, and you can remain with me without grieving any one. Your father will see the tranquillity of his declining years secured, and he will pass them near his beloved daughter; your mother will no longer be overworked or worried by anxiety; and I shall rejoice in an arrangement, which will, while contributing to the happiness of your parents, have the great advantage of keeping you near me. This is what I wish to propose to you."

Ruth transported with joy, knelt before her mistress, and, taking her hands between her own, covered them with kisses and tears. Astonishment and gratitude filled her soul. The welfare and happiness of her parents was all she desired, and this she could most sensibly appreciate. Her thanks were very affecting, for her tender and filial heart was thoroughly touched. However, the disappointment, which her friends at the farm would feel, dashed her extreme joy with a momentary shade of regret; but she repelled the thought as unworthy of them. Their friendship was too sincere and unalloyed for them not to rejoice at an arrangement which contributed to the happiness of

an honest family so dear to her, and hitherto so unfortunate.

On leaving her mistress, Ruth went to her own room. As in all the important events of her life, so now she felt it as a kind of necessity to pour out her heart before God, and to bless Him for his benefits. After some minutes passed in prayer and praise, she rose and began to write to her father and mother the letter which was to tell them the happy news and afford them so much joy. Nearly every line was moistened with sweet tears, for she could not help weeping when she thought that in a short time, she would press to her heart the beings she most loved in the world. From that moment, to the hour when the post could bring a reply, her agitation was extreme. Twice only was she disappointed. The third day brought the desired letter. It was full of expressions of the happiness and gratitude of those who wrote it, and ended by announcing, that on that day week, the time intervening being necessary to make their little domestic arrangements, all the family would start for Melrbyn.

Ruth, filled with delight, hastened to Springfield to communicate the news contained in the letter, and whilst she found in her former friends,

as she had anticipated, the most complete and lively sympathy for her happiness, Miss Longton equally satisfied, formed for the future new plans of kindness, the details of which, we shall describe in the following chapter.





CHAPTER XIX.

A HAPPY MEETING.

"I have been young, and now am old : and yet saw I never the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread."—Ps. xxxvii. 25.

THE time is seven o'clock in the evening. Standing at the door of a pretty honey-suckled lodge, situated at the entrance of Melrhyn Park, a young woman, neatly dressed, might be seen, her whole attitude and countenance portraying anxious expectation. Her eager looks are incessantly directed along the high road, which passes at a little distance, and her ear seems to catch the least sound. The interior of the cottage affords a cheerful aspect of cleanliness and good order. A well-stocked dresser, a polished table of chestnut wood, a large and comfortable arm-chair, a bright fire-grate—all prove that a generous and kindly hand has presided over the arrangement of this little establishment, and sought, whilst helping poverty, to alleviate the sufferings of infirmity.

The table is covered with a cloth white as snow,

and an excellent supper ready to be served up is placed upon the hob to keep it warm. Two persons at this moment occupy the room, and they appear almost as much excited, as she who is standing on the threshold of the lodge. The one feeble and aged sits in the great arm-chair near the hearth, where a bright fire is burning, for the cold is still severe. The other is resplendent with youth, strength, and gladness; her heart beats for a friend and overflows with happiness.

The reader has doubtless already recognized the excellent Margery and the pretty Rachel, who have come to bid a kind welcome to that family, whom they already regard as part of their own. Margery has ventured forth in spite of her infirmities and weakness, leaning on the strong arm of David. Dolly, and even little Tommy participate in the general joy. They are, however, further on up the high road and watching the arrival of the travellers. But, as they can come by two different routes, and no one knows which they may choose, Ruth, in spite of her eagerness has thought it best to remain at the lodge, since it would be exceedingly disappointing not to be present at a moment so dearly and ardently expected. She begins to feel somewhat alarmed at the delay, which seems to her eternal, and fears that some accident may be

the cause ; the minutes seem hours to her ; she raises her heart to God, and prays for the safety of her beloved parents.

At this instant the signal agreed upon is heard. A strong sonorous shout comes from the outpost, it is repeated by the sweet voice of a young girl, and taken up by the shrill cry of Tommy, for he also understands what is going on. He sees every one pleased, and jumps about clapping his hands with delight. Ruth did not await a second intimation ; she darted forth, light and trembling like a leaf. A battered cart, covered with a thick grey canvass roof, appears at a bend in the road. Ruth recognized it at once, and even the old and faithful Neptune who sometimes preceded it, and sometimes returned behind as if to secure its safety. There is no more doubt, it is they !

How shall we describe the hour which followed ; the mutual embracings of father, daughter, mother, sister, and brother ; the touching expressions of affection and joy ; the exclamations of surprise at the change which had taken place in each member of the family, and the host of cross questions which confused everybody ; then the arrival at the lodge, and the interview between Margery and Elizabeth ; the entrance of the poor father supported on one side by Ruth, and on the other by the stout arm of

David, who carried rather than supported him, and who settled him down in the easy arm-chair which had been placed for him near the fire ; the admiration and gratitude of the arrivals at sight of their new dwelling, and the useful and excellent furniture it contained—in a word, the effusion of gratitude and friendship exchanged between the two families so well-formed to understand and love one another ! How still more shall we paint the touching grace, with which Ruth dragged into the middle of the circle her dear Rachel and presented her to her parents, as her first protector, and consequently the original cause of her present happiness ; or the solemn and melting manner in which old Margery declared, with eyes raised to Heaven, that she considered the sojourn of Ruth in her house an especial mercy, and that she did not pass a single day without blessing God for sending her amongst them ! We shall not attempt to describe one of these scenes, and still less the sensations of Elizabeth and her husband on hearing the touching praises of their beloved child. It would be impossible to express these different emotions, and it is better to let them be imagined than to weaken them by feeble painting.

Within a month, the new comers were settled at Melrhyn, just as if they had always lived there.

In the short intervals which his habitual sufferings left him, Ruth's father occupied himself with making nets. Elizabeth busied herself about the house, and George, the eldest son, dug up the little garden attached to the cottage. Moreover, he was often employed at the Castle, where he was entrusted with commissions which required activity and intelligence. Little Peter, their youngest child, was sent to school every day, Dolly coming in the morning to fetch him, when she took her own brother Tommy. Although they were too young to learn much, they were placed among other children in order to form them to early habits of discipline, and give their parents a little leisure. Ruth, now so happy, often repeated to her mistress the deep thanks, which her parents could not refrain from expressing towards their benefactress since their arrival.

One day, Miss Longton inquired whether the change of air had benefited her father? Ruth replied that she had not yet observed any very satisfactory improvement, that, in fact, she regarded with considerable anxiety his great melancholy, whenever his sufferings kept him idle.

"Well, then, Ruth," replied Miss Longton, "you must try to amuse him, and pass a part of your day with him, for in keeping you near me, my

intention has never been to place you on the footing of an ordinary lady's-maid. I wish your time to be entirely your own, with the single exception of what my personal service requires, which," she added with a smile of affection, "you know well I like only to receive from you."

Ruth thanked her mistress with a heart full of gratitude, observing with a playful smile, that "if spoilt children were always importunate, Miss Longton must fear that she would have to repent one day her excessive indulgence." Lilian, however, did not apprehend this; she knew well the girl upon whom her kindness was bestowed, and her attachment for Ruth daily increased with her esteem.





CHAPTER XX.

AN UNEXPECTED CALAMITY.

"He said unto them an enemy hath done this."—*MATT. xiii. 28.*

TWO years elapsed without anything remarkable happening to either of the personages of our story. The sole event worthy of interest, is the manner in which the time passed away for Ruth, for it is with her history that we are mainly interested. At one time she feared she should be obliged to accompany her young mistress to London during the season ; but Lilian had become attached to Melrhyn, and dreaded to plunge again into the midst of that world, whose dangers she could now perceive. The Colonel, also, attached to the place by a thousand associations, was delighted to find his daughter desirous of remaining there, and invited to the house a select circle of friends who gave an air of life to the once solitary mansion.

Ruth was enchanted with this arrangement. She would now be at liberty to devote the greater part of

her time to nursing and amusing her father, whose infirmities made him frequently low-spirited, and sometimes even a little morose. Every day, after having first given some minutes to prayer and meditation, a duty it was always pleasing to her to fulfil, she attended upon Miss Longton ; and after having discharged her duties to her, betook herself to the lodge. She multiplied herself, so to speak, for she would assist her mother in her little household cares, see to her father, and still find time to visit some cottages, where there was either a sick person or a family in distress. For all she had words of consolation, and it seemed to please the Lord to give her words an especial persuasiveness, in order, doubtless, to reward her faithful and active charity. Knowing, moreover, the benevolence of her young mistress, Ruth frequently petitioned her, and never in vain, in behalf of the poor. So her visits were anxiously looked for, and the blessings of the poor, a priceless treasure in the eyes of God, followed her wherever she went. Her reputation for goodness, virtue, and charity, spread at length throughout the whole neighbourhood, and if any had need of assistance and consolation, they invariably had recourse to this excellent young girl.

Her greatest happiness, and for her the moment of real relaxation, was when on Sundays she went

with Rachel to the village church, and especially on those days, when she could enjoy the inestimable privilege of partaking of the Holy Communion at the table of our Lord. It was at the feet of that Divine Master, meek and humble in spirit, that she learnt to bear with a touching patience the exactions, sometimes a little irritating, of her father, whose temper had become embittered by long physical suffering. It was in these pious exercises that she learnt to detect and avoid those rocks and shoals against which so many dash themselves to pieces. It was from this spiritual fountain that she drew all those graces which rendered her the model of her young companions. Aunt Jane had been especially urgent, whilst teaching her her duties, to make her understand this great truth, that prayer alone can establish our feet in the way to salvation. "My dear child," she would often say, "know that all the good, all the treasures of a Christian are contained in that word *prayer*; that without it all the other means, which are given for our sanctification, are rendered useless. With what goodness does not our Divine Saviour receive a simple movement of our hearts towards Him, and what great fruits would not men derive from these heavenly communications, if they would only have recourse to them more often! The majority believe that

they have satisfied the obligation of prayer when they have uttered, whilst the mind is entirely engrossed by frivolous thoughts, a set form of words. It is to them the denunciation of the indignant prophet applies—"This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me."

Let us return to Ruth. At the end of the two years, of which we have spoken, a grand event took place at Castle Melrhyn. It was the marriage of Lilian Longton to Sir Lionel Rivers, a young man distinguished by his birth, his fortune, and especially his personal merits. Miss Longton had on several occasions observed the manly independence with which, when the occasion called for it, he had asserted his principles as a Christian, a title, the nobility of which he fully comprehended. She had reason to believe that in him she would find real happiness, since, in the midst of the dangers of the world he had not been shaken either by its examples or its sneers, but had steadily marched onwards with a firm step in the narrow path of faith and virtue. Some years before, these considerations would not, perhaps, have presented themselves to her mind; at least they would not have had any influence on her determination, for she was then ignorant of the great truth, that happiness not sanctified from above is transient and delusive.

A few days after her marriage, Lilian left with her husband for Merton Hall, situated some few miles from London, on the banks of the Thames. There she was to pass six weeks with her new family, and then to return to Melrhyn, where she wished to reside every year during the summer months. Such were the arrangements concluded before her marriage; for Colonel Longton could not make up his mind to be always separated from a daughter so dearly loved. During the winter they were to reside in London, where Sir Lionel had a splendid mansion in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park.

At the close of the autumn the necessary arrangements to leave the country had been made, the day of departure fixed, and Ruth was ready to accompany her mistress, when her father was suddenly seized with a violent attack of his old complaint. Lady Rivers would not, under the circumstances, deprive him of the attention of his daughter, so she set out on her journey alone, leaving Ruth behind, who was to rejoin her as soon as the old man's health was sufficiently re-established.

Although Ruth was glad to remain with her family, it was not without regret that she saw her mistress go away, for her attachment to Lady Lilian increased every day, and every day Lady Lilian seemed to become more worthy of it. Had

this feeling not been so sincere, nothing could have determined her to follow her mistress every year to London, and she only consoled herself for the necessity of leaving her parents by the hope of procuring for them, thanks to the considerable wages she received, a thousand little comforts which their age rendered very essential.

But God did not intend that her cup of enjoyment should have no bitter in it. An event took place which upset these new plans, and proved a severe trial to Ruth, to David, and his family.

One evening as Ruth, sitting by her father's bed, was reading to him, her little brother ran headlong into the room, calling out loudly to his sister, "Quick, quick, Ruth! come and see a beautiful fire down in the fields; it's as high as a house."

Ruth ran after him, and, perceived smoky flames, which rose in dark wavy columns to the sky, and appeared exactly in the direction of Springfield. Her fears increased as the violence of the fire increased. She would have run to the farm to give notice of what had happened, and render all the assistance in her power, but she could not quit the lodge. Her mother was absent, and she could not leave her father alone. After some few minutes of prayerful solicitude, George entered, and told

her that a fire had actually broken out on the farm, but that he had arrived in time to prevent its reaching the house and the wood in the vicinity; nevertheless, several stacks of corn were consumed. The calamity was attributed to malevolence, since several farmers had about this time been persecuted by incendiaries, because they had introduced improved machinery into the cultivation of their fields.

There is no need to relate the part which Ruth and her parents acted in the misfortune which had befallen their friend and neighbour. It was not confined to a barren compassion. Gratitude, that sentiment innate in all noble and generous souls, could not fail to find an echo in the heart of Ruth and her father and mother. They consulted as to the best means of alleviating the distress of David and Margery. A small sum, the result of Ruth's savings, might be offered to them, but this could not be any great accommodation. Although their friends were not ruined irretrievably, yet the losses they had sustained would for several years necessitate the strictest economy in their living and in the management of the farm. Suddenly a happy idea flashed across the mind, or rather the heart, of Ruth, and, full of joy, in spite of the sacrifices which this plan would impose upon her personal

feelings and interests, she stated it frankly to her parents. It was nothing less than to renounce in favour of Rachel the numerous advantages she enjoyed at the Castle, and the exquisite happiness which she derived from being near her dear mistress. Ruth would interest Lady Rivers in favour of her friend; she would introduce her, and felt sure she would succeed. She would insist so firmly on her desire not to leave her father, that Lady Rivers would willingly consent, in order not to grieve her, to allow Rachel to replace her, whilst the latter could, during the years of trouble which threatened her parents, send them assistance. Besides, Rachel could be spared from the farm without inconvenience, for Dolly was no longer a child, but a sweet and amiable girl, full of submission and devotion to her grandmother, and of affection and respect for her father.

We will not follow Ruth in the carrying out of her generous plan; suffice it to say, that three months later, Rachel was received at Melrhyn Castle in the quality of a superior lady's-maid to Lady Rivers. She endeavoured with all her might to justify the praises of her friend, and found herself placed advantageously in a family which offered every protection against the dangers which she might have met with elsewhere on leaving her

father's roof. Margery, assisted thus by that same young girl whom she had at first sheltered out of mere charity, scarcely perceived the misfortune which had visited her, since she enjoyed, as in more prosperous times, the comforts and attentions to which the affections of her children had habituated her.





CHAPTER XXI.

AN OLD MAN'S STORY.

"If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."—GEN. xliiii. 14.



ALTHOUGH consenting that Ruth should not accompany her when she left Melrhyn for London, Lady Rivers still claimed, during the time she passed in the country, a portion of Ruth's leisure, and this drew the latter frequently to the Castle. Consequently, Rachel and she were often together, and every day their mutual affection seemed to increase. As in the past, so now, a long walk on a fine summer evening, after the services of the Sunday were over, was their greatest delight, and not unfrequently they paid a short visit to the ruined Chapel on the hill. One evening they perceived, under the shadow of a wall, an old man sitting in profound meditation. His head was nearly bald, and rested on a stick, which supported it, whilst the few thin threads of silvery hair which fringed his neck were rudely ruffled by the high wind.

At this spectacle the two girls both felt a feeling of respect, which, indeed, every generous heart cannot fail to experience instinctively at the sight of old age. On passing near him they observed that his attempts to rise were very painful, accordingly they offered him the assistance of their hands, and thus enabled him to get up. Touched by their attentions, he stated, in reply to their questions, that he had presumed too much on his strength, and had ventured so far from his dwelling that he was afraid he should not get back before the storm, which appeared to be very threatening, broke out. The figure of the old man was so venerable, his face so expressive of grief and resignation, that the two friends felt deeply moved by respect and interest for him. Ruth, asking Rachel to wait with him, ran and quickly fetched from the farm a slice of bread and beef, and a small bottle of cider ; she had not forgotten, too, to provide herself with a large umbrella, less elegant, doubtless, than a West-End tradesman would keep amongst his stock, but more commodious, perhaps, and useful. She begged the old man to fortify himself by a light meal, and poured out his cider for him with a grace and kindness that won his heart.

The old man knew not how to express his astonishment and gratitude for such attention, and

was about to speak his thanks, but, at the first words, Rachel interrupted him, observing that the sky was overcast, and that they must not lose time if they would avoid the storm which already rumbled in the distance. After drinking a little cider the old man felt somewhat revived, and expressed a desire to return home alone; but Ruth and Rachel declared they would accompany him to render him, in case of rain, the assistance he needed. This determination called forth a fresh outburst of thanks, which came direct from the heart, and, though overwhelming, had nothing of servility in it. The clothes he wore, although poor, were perfectly clean, and in his person, as on his features, there was the impress of a humble dignity, which, in all conditions, belongs only to an honest and upright man. Supported by his stick in one hand, and holding on to Ruth's arm by the other, feeble and tottering, he set forward on his road, and, after an hour of slow and painful walking, they arrived at his cottage. This was situated half way up the slope of a hill, which was ascended by a steep and narrow path. In the external aspect of this rural tenement, Ruth remarked an appearance of order and neatness, as well as the traces of a modest affluence, which she had hardly expected to find. A hop plant, trained

along the porch, covered it with its supple and graceful foliage, whilst the little garden which surrounded the cottage appeared carefully cultivated. At their approach a large dog uttered a sharp bark, but, on recognizing his master, ran towards him, and, by his playful manners and frisky leaps, exhibited his delight at his master's return.

The old man caressed his canine friend, saying, in a low voice, "Poor animal ! I have only thee to receive me when I come home." At this moment a woman of about sixty years of age came out from the cottage, and demanded of the old man, in a harsh tone, why he had presumed to remain away so long ; she added, grumbling still, that it put her out very much waiting for him till this hour ; but she stopped short on perceiving Ruth and Rachel, who took leave of their *protégé* and prepared to go, in spite of his entreaties that they would rest a little under his roof. But night was approaching, some large drops of rain had fallen, and they had not an instant to lose. Seeing that he could not retain them, the old man said, in a voice full of emotion, "May Heaven recompense you, young friends, for what you have done for me to-day ; the blessing of an old man always brings happiness ; and mine, be assured, will follow you everywhere."

Half an hour afterwards, Ruth and Rachel regained their home, and felt that sweet satisfaction which one always feels on following a virtuous impulse. As to Ruth, a project worthy of herself occupied her thoughts. Perhaps Heaven would permit her to comfort another person in distress, and she fell asleep resolving in her own mind to pay a speedy visit to the old man.

The following Sunday, a little before sunset, the two girls arrived a second time at the cottage on the hill-side. Their friend with the silvery threads of hair was sitting near the door, under the shade of an apple-tree, which was laden with fruit. He uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure on seeing them, and, closing the Bible in which he had been reading, advanced to meet them, asking, at the same time, with a glad smile on his face, what motive could have induced them to visit a solitary old man so incapable of affording them any amusement. They replied, that they came to know if he had suffered any inconvenience from the long walk of the preceding Sunday ; then Ruth added, with a gentle modesty, that they hoped he did not think them indiscreet in thus returning. He assured them with a warmth, which proved how much he was touched and grateful for their visit—that he was only too glad to see them. They then took

a seat on one of the wooden benches in the garden, and the old man, after awhile, spoke about his isolation, and the circumstances which occasioned it. He wanted, it seemed to them, to speak of his trouble to hearts capable of sympathizing with him; and the story he told them was deeply affecting. We will give briefly a *résumé* of the narrative which he related to Ruth and Rachel.

He was named, he said, Matthew Drew, had never known his mother, and, at the age of nine, lost his father, a hosier and draper in London. An uncle, who was left executor, took charge of the business, and the education of Matthew and his only brother, a lad four years older than himself. The latter, whilst still a young man, having a good situation offered him at Lisbon, went out and settled there, realizing in a few years a very considerable fortune.

Matthew, as soon as he was qualified, took to his father's business, which eventually became his own. Conducted prudently and zealously, it succeeded to the best of his wishes. He therefore thought of marrying, and his choice fell upon a young person, without fortune, it is true, but whose sweet and amiable virtues he had long admired. For several years he was perfectly happy; at the close of the day he found in the society of his wife

and an only son, named Henry, all the relaxation that his heart could desire. His dear boy had just attained his twelfth year when misfortune began to cloud their hitherto prosperous career. Considerable losses, occasioned by circumstances too long to detail, tried this quiet family severely, so that, at the end of about three years, Matthew Drew found himself reduced to a state bordering on ruin.

He was forced to give up his business and leave London, employing the small capital that still remained in buying the cottage which he now occupied, and the field and garden which surrounded it. Here they resigned themselves to live with the strictest economy. Thanks to their entire submission to the will of God, and the touching union which reigned between them, they passed in this humble retreat several years of peace and even of happiness. They educated their son in those sentiments and principles which alone could lead him to the Saviour, and which made him the consolation and joy of his excellent parents.

A sort of noble pride animated the eyes of the venerable old man whilst enumerating the virtues and the rare qualities of his son; and, when he spoke of the loss of his faithful wife, who died ten

years after their arrival at this place, bitter tears rolled down his cheeks, in spite of his efforts to restrain them. The many years that had elapsed since this afflicting separation, had not diminished his grief. After the death of his wife his affections became concentrated on his son, and the two devoted their lives to the happiness of each other.

One evening the postman brought a letter from Lisbon. It was there, as we have said, that Matthew Drew's brother had settled. For a long time the latter had been entirely neglected, and no communication had passed between the two; but within the last two or three years his letters had become more frequent, and in them he constantly complained of his solitary lot. A widower, old, rich, and without children, he saw his life passing away in sad isolation, or himself the object of the interested attentions of two nephews of his wife—for he had married a Portuguese woman—who kept close to him in the hope of being made his heirs. They constantly spoke to him of the duty of persons arrived at his time of life of making their wills; but the old uncle felt disgusted at their base cupidity, and could not endure their presence. The purport of the letter to which we have just alluded was to ask his brother Matthew to allow

his son Henry, of whom he had spoken so well, to go out to Portugal for three months, and comfort his declining days. He added, that he felt his end approaching, and that it would be a great consolation for him to die in the arms of an affectionate relative, rather than surrounded by greedy and indifferent foreigners. Matthew could not refuse to a brother, almost dying, his last request; and, eight days after the receipt of the letter, Henry had started for Southampton, there to take the steamer for Lisbon. Before leaving, he had received the tender blessings of his father, and the injunction not to prolong his absence beyond the three months.

Alas! thrice three months had elapsed since his departure, and not only did Henry not appear, but, after the first letter, which announced his safe arrival, nothing more had been heard of him. It was impossible to suppose negligence on the part of so excellent a son, so the most terrible distress of mind overwhelmed the poor father, and gave to his features that expression of grief which had so much interested Ruth and Rachel in his favour.

The narrative of the old man was prolonged later than they could have anticipated. Each time that he spoke of his son he knew not how to check

himself, and repeated in a thousand ways the praises which overflowed his paternal heart. It was almost night when the two friends separated, having discussed on the road, with a keen interest, all they had just heard.





CHAPTER XXII.

AS NOW, SO EVER.

"And they called Rebekah and said unto her, wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go."—GEN. xxiv. 58.

FROM this time the cottage of Matthew became every Sunday the goal of the two friends' walks; and more independent than her companion, Ruth even went there alone sometimes in the course of the week. The deep feeling with which she spoke of God, of the trials which He often inflicts upon those He loves, and of his pitiful power in putting an end to their sufferings, penetrated the heart of the bereaved old man, and filled him with peaceful resignation. She, who spoke to him thus, seemed to understand his grief so fully, her eyes expressed so deep a sympathy with his sorrows, and such implicit confidence in the merciful dispensation of Divine Providence, that Matthew Drew felt revived and even hopeful. His gratitude to her, who procured for him the sole moments of happiness which he had for a long

time enjoyed, it was not in his power to express, and yet to her was he to owe still greater obligations.

Henry, before he went away, had charged a woman of the neighbourhood to take care of his father, and see to his meals, at the same time paying for three months in advance, the sum agreed upon with this woman.

At first she performed her duty pretty well ; but not receiving any more money, and Henry not reappearing, she listened only to her hard and selfish heart, and after having for some time mingled her services with reproaches and grumbings, she declared at length she would attend to him no longer. The attentions of this woman, in fact, failed him at the very moment, when poor Matthew Drew had most need of them, since in consequence of a fall some days before, he had received a wound in his leg which caused him great suffering.

One morning, Ruth arrived at Matthew's bedside, and found him weak and dejected, and not knowing what to do. The fever had not left him since his accident, and the bad season which was approaching might render the consequences very serious. Ruth, therefore resolved to devote whatever time she could dispose of to the care of the old man, and by rising an hour or so earlier than usual, she considered she could make the necessary time,

so that none of her ordinary duties would suffer from those she was about to impose upon herself. From this moment, every day saw her at the cottage, dressing Matthew's wound, preparing his food, putting every thing in order, and above all, fortifying his courage, and suggesting to him the duty of obedience and resignation. Through her, too, Dr. Blessington was informed of the accident to the old man, and the worthy rector frequently came to comfort him by his presence, and strengthen him by his good counsel.

Ruth had, moreover, contrived to interest Lady Rivers in favour of her venerable *protégé*, and frequently carried to him marks of Lilian's generosity ; so that unable any longer to restrain the feelings with which his heart was filled for the pious Ruth, Matthew often exclaimed, " All my happiness now flows through you ; but how can I ever repay you all I owe ?"

Winter had passed, and no intelligence of Henry had arrived to console his aged father. It was now the first days of May, and the trees which enclosed Matthew Drew's cottage, had put on the livery of Spring. Ruth was at the cottage performing her usual duties there. The old man's bed was made, his room swept, his table laid, and sitting near the fire, he was preparing to take his

breakfast. Ruth on her knees before him was wrapping up his leg, still a little inflamed, in flannel, when the old man uttered a sudden piercing cry, stretched out his arms, and seemed about to swoon. Ruth turned quickly round and perceived standing on the threshold of the door a young man, whose physiognomy expressed surprise and deep emotion. At the exclamation of the old man, he threw himself into his arms, crying, "My poor father!" It was Henry, it was that son, long-expected, awaited with so much anxiety, asked for of Heaven with so many prayers. When the first burst of joy and affection were over, Matthew was about to introduce to his son her, whom he had always called his comforting angel; but she had disappeared, not wishing that the presence of a stranger should mar the first moments of a meeting so tender and long-desired.

Henry related to his father the events which had occurred to him since his departure, and explained the cause of that silence, which had afflicted him so much. Having won the affection of his uncle, he said, he had been named his universal legatee. The fortune of the old man being nearly all invested in bank-shares and stock, his nephews, avaricious and clever men, deaf to the voice of honesty and conscience, contrived to withdraw

considerable sums by means of bills; and at the death of their uncle, which occurred shortly after Henry's arrival, they attempted to throw upon him the odious suspicion of having appropriated in advance what was not his, and of forging a will in order to justify himself. All the machinations of wickedness and calumny were brought into play. Henry was thrown into prison and kept there privately, and so had no means of making known to his father his frightful position. After long months of grief and alarm, the fate of this honest young man interested deeply a distinguished lawyer of the city, who took his defence in hand, and unveiled all the guilty frauds of his adversaries. His case was tried and gained, and Henry restored to honour and liberty, but the considerable sums taken by the nephews could not be recovered, one of them having fled to India laden with his odious riches, before even the trial came on.

What remained for Henry, sufficed, however, to secure for him a comfortable competency for the future; and old Matthew Drew blessed Providence who had given him in abundance, what was necessary, and yet had preserved him from the great dangers of opulence.

We may well imagine after the narrative of his son, that the old man related to him, in his turn, the

manner in which his life had passed during his absence, and doubtless Ruth made a considerable figure in the account. Matthew never wearied of his subject, and excited in his son the admiration and gratitude for her which filled him. From that time one fixed thought occupied the good old man's heart and soul, and became the object of his most earnest wish and prayer. What happiness would it not be, could he call her, who had so long lavished on him the attentions and almost the affection of one, his daughter ! What a treasure for his beloved Henry, a woman endowed with such manifold virtues, with all the qualities which can attract, attach, and delight ! Henry himself was not less anxious and deeply concerned than his father in the idea. He had seen and admired Ruth, and was eager to make her further acquaintance.

Often had Ruth spoken to Matthew Drew of the friendship which existed between her parents and the good old Margery. Matthew, however, had not been introduced to the former ; but, when he had been able to walk, he sometimes went as far as David's, with whom he formerly used to have business transactions, and who, informed by Ruth of his infirmities, came, when he had time, to pass an hour at the hill-side cottage. Cheered and revived by the return of his son, Matthew

one morning braced himself up for a walk to Springfield, there to communicate his plan to Margery, and engage her to employ her influence with the parents of Ruth in bringing about his cherished scheme. We may easily imagine with what warmth the old man pleaded the cause of his son, boasting not a little of the high principles and excellent qualities which rendered him worthy of the happiness thus solicited. Margery, who loved Ruth as her own child, willingly undertook so agreeable a task. The more she reflected upon it, the more it seemed to her that Providence destined these two young people, admirably adapted for one another, to pass the remaining portion of their pilgrimage on earth together.

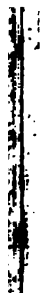
The next day Margery broached the subject to Ruth's parents, who rejoiced at the idea, and blessed Heaven for a proposal which seemed fraught with happiness for their daughter. Ruth, when spoken to by Henry Drew, asked a fortnight for reflection and prayer, since, in a matter so important to her spiritual no less than to her temporal welfare, she desired above all things to consult the will of God. During that time Henry, on his part, did not cease to address his prayers to Heaven for the success of a project on which his future happiness appeared to depend.

Six months later Ruth was married to Henry, and, after having been the model of a young girl, became the pattern of a Christian wife.

In Ruth's Vineyard—by which we mean to designate the sphere of Ruth's active exertions in the paths of piety—we have attempted to show that "Godliness with contentment is great gain;" and we believe that this truth has been proved more than once in the course of our story. Neither the advantages of an illustrious birth or of fortune, nor the power which results from wealth, belonged to our young heroine; she possessed none of those attributes which, humanly speaking, can aid in effecting much good in the world. She had, however, received from God the reward which He always confers on the humble heart whose sole hope and trust is in his mercy and goodness, through Jesus Christ. She had been endowed with a solid but tender piety, and an enlightened love, and these rendered her very eloquent in painting the pure joys of the servants of the Lord. It was this lively and expansive faith which aided her so powerfully in bending under the yoke of religion the head of an accomplished heiress, as well as of penetrating the heart of a simple villager; that inspired her with that lively charity which we have

seen her exercising, now towards a poor dying sinner—now towards ignorant children—now towards infirm and desolate old age—and ever for the eternal welfare and consolation of all. We shall be happy if the example of the simple and touching virtues of Ruth shall excite in any young heart the desire to walk in her footsteps. If she finds but one imitator, we shall be well recompensed for the labour which the recital of her history has cost us.

THE END.



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